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DENISE ROBINS

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TWICE HAVE I LOVED

'It can't be true,' she kept saying to herself, *'Rod can't be here. I don't believe it.'*

But as her shaking hand handed Rod the toast, he glanced up at her. She had thought—or hoped—that her former feeling for him was dead. Yet why did her heart plunge when he looked up at her in the old remembered way, and she smelt the familiar odour of his hair-lotion, and of cigar-smoke? Rod was very fond of his cheroots.

In this moment of time, Etta was conscious of a hateful resurgence of the emotions that had once broken the ice of her natural reserve and swept her into his arms.

Rod had always been such an exciting lover, such an amusing talented friend, and all the tears she had shed when he left her for that little red-headed thing the other side of the table, seemed to pour yet again into a bottomless pool in which she might drown—drown all over again.

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Twice Have I Loved

Denise Robins

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The Foolish Lover

The Sun sang as I strode along
And thus and thus sang he:
"He who loves for the first time
Even unhappily,
He who loves for the first time,
A god, a god is he!"

The Moon sang as I wandered slow
And thus and thus sang she:
"He who loves for the second time
And loves unhappily
If it be for the second time,
A fool, a fool is he!"

O Sun and Moon and Stars laugh on,
For such a fool am I!
Twice have I loved unhappily,
Twice has love passed me by.
O Sun and Moon and Stars laugh on
I laugh with you—and die!

Verse by Heine.
Song composed by Ivy Frances Klein.

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I

"What are you going to do now, Etta?"

For a moment Etta did not answer this question and Marian Collis, seated on the sofa, smoking her cigarette, looked at the girl whom she considered her very best friend, a trifle anxiously.

Came the reply: "I don't know, and I wish I could add those famous words 'I couldn't care less', but I *do*! I care terribly — about everything — my work, my love and my life and it's all gone wrong!"

"Oh, darling, don't be like that," said Marian sorrowfully.

"But that's how I feel. I know it's wrong but I can't help it. It's how I'm made."

Etta's reply was as despairing and passionate as the expression on her face and the misery in her heart.

She turned from Marian's anxious gaze, thrust her thumbs into the leather belt she wore with her hipsters and stared around the room. She used to like it. It had been enormous fun decorating it with Marian and the third girl they shared the flat with. She used to be really proud of their home at the top of an old-fashioned house in Earl's Court, but she supposed she ought not to have come back here. It held far too many memories. In this very room, she and Rod used to see each other every

evening. It was here she had spent so many glorious memorable hours with him.

Now Rod had gone. It was all over.

What was she going to do? Her emotions were still so confused and her physical energies so low, she really didn't know the answer.

She and Marian had just finished three months' hard work — the final term — at the Alice Anderson Domestic College, completing a two-year course.

Etta had got her diploma. She knew she was a good cook — especially talented in that direction. She was now 'Cordon Bleu' and liked the work. She had never coveted the usual secretarial job, or life in a boutique, like Christine Johnson, the third girl who lived with them. Anybody who had trained under the famous Alice Anderson could be sure of a first-rate post and be handsomely paid, too, in these days when first-class cooks were hard to get.

Now both girls were ready to start their careers. But unlike Marian, Etta had lost interest. She couldn't bear to look into a future that didn't hold Rod. A life that had once been filled with the intense happiness of being loved, and of loving him, had ended.

What had happened? Why had it all gone wrong? She had been so sure of him, but today she no longer had any confidence left — even in herself. Yet she was aware she had every cause to feel pleased in so many ways. She had never lacked friends. She danced well — so she was told — she had a sense of humour — she was popular because she was a good listener, and most people seemed to like her. Apart from the loss of her beloved mother she had been happy and carefree in the days before Rodney Stone came into her life. But something that her stepmother — the good-natured and shrewd Sheila — had told her one day, returned to memory now and made Etta think twice about herself.

"You're an odd one, Etta. Your father says your mother was the same. You're sociable all right, yet not easy-going like me. You keep things to yourself. Isn't that what's caused the break with your boy-friend? Can't you relax a bit more?"

It had been said after she lost Rod. She had been spending a night or two down in Devon with her father and his second wife. She hadn't resented Sheila's comments, but she had argued, "What do I do that makes you or anyone else feel I'm so tied up in myself?"

"You're absolutely sweet to everybody, dear, we all adore you, but there's a kind of red light you show at times. More 'stop' than 'go' if you know what I mean," she ended with a laugh.

And Etta did know what she meant and it caused her to think. Yes — her mother had been a woman of deep feeling and deep reserves. She had inherited that characteristic. People could break through so far — but no further. So perhaps it was that side of her which had put Rod off.

Even while she acknowledged the justice of Sheila's appraisal (and after all Marian said the same), it only served to make Etta feel more than ever shut out and alone. She just *couldn't* let herself go to any real extent. Something always seemed to hold her back. And knowing it couldn't make Rod's behaviour less heart-breaking for her.

She brooded over this thing called love. Human beings just seemed to get suddenly hypnotised. Rod had definitely put her under a spell. Then he had broken it and she could no longer bear to face reality. But it was time she did. His betrayal of her and the way he had rushed straight out of her arms to Claudia had been almost unbearable.

She remembered one particular night when they were alone up here and he had wanted her to go to bed with him. She, too, had wanted it but she just couldn't. It would

mean so much — and she wanted it to be only *after* marriage. At the time he had just laughed it all off and called her his 'old-fashioned darling with a passion for virginity'. All had seemed well again the next day. That was the day he had met Claudia and *she* had won. She had been the sort to say 'yes', and the 'red' for Rod had turned to 'green'.

I must snap out of it, Etta thought. *I must even try to change myself if I can.*

"Rod isn't the only man in the world," Marian reminded her. But at the time he had seemed the only one for Etta. She winced, remembering him vividly — his good looks, his blue eyes, his big amusing mouth, his infectious laugh.

He was on the staff at the B.B.C., doing well in light entertainment production, and a 'Pop' enthusiast. Owner of a large library of fascinating discs which he used to play to her. That sort of music didn't really appeal to Etta, but she accepted it because she was in love. Claudia, the girl he had married, was Rod's type of course. She ran a boutique in the King's Road and she was as smart and trendy as the clothes she sold. No doubt they made a terrific pair, Etta thought bitterly.

"At least," Marian said now — suddenly — "Rod could have let you know before he ever did, that he was cooling off, and told you about that popsie of his. Don't you see how rottenly he behaved to you?"

"Not altogether," was Etta's reply. "He just dreaded telling me, so he put it off until the last moment. Claudia suited him — I didn't. Leave it at that, Marian. I might have met a man *I* preferred, then *I'd* have had to tell Rod and hurt *him*."

"You couldn't hurt Rod," snapped Marian, "he's not the sensitive type. He's too vain and self-centred."

"But you saw for yourself how terribly upset he was when he finally told me about Claudia. You came in that evening just as he was saying goodbye."

"I'm sorry," said Marian, "I hate him and I can't abide Claudia. But let's talk about your future job. I've *had* Rodney Stone! I wish him all the bad luck he can get with his fascinating wife. He'll soon find out that he pushed the wrong girl out of his life."

The ghost of a smile lifted Etta's mouth.

"You're a darling to me, Marian, but you're a bit spiteful about poor Rod."

"Poor Rod indeed!"

Etta gave a sad half-smile at her friend while she lit a cigarette. She was such a good friend, dear little plump Marian, who lacked glamour but was so essentially nice and kind. She never lacked friends — and was that rare type, somebody one could absolutely rely upon.

At this moment Marian was sitting back in her chair smoking her own cigarette and taking stock of Etta. Her appreciation of this her greatest friend was always whole-hearted. Sometimes Marian wondered why Etta — christened Henrietta which she didn't like — hadn't turned to a more glamorous line of work than cooking and housekeeping. She was so beautiful. Of course she looked ill and too thin at the moment and had lost her usual sparkle, but she was slim and graceful, and her high cheek-bones and sweet delicate mouth would have got her a job as a photographic model easily. But it was not her line. She had no vanity. She was lucky enough to have one of those enviable camellia-like skins. Her dark silky hair curved softly down to her shoulders. She was a little short-sighted and wore glasses for reading, but she was saving up for contact lenses, which Marian approved of because her eyes were her best feature — more green than gold, very expressive, under naturally long lashes.

She had attractive hands. Marian looked at them now and said suddenly, "When you start work, ducky, do wear gloves. I'd hate to see you spoil those filbert nails. Mine

don't matter." She spread out her plump fingers with their square nails, and grimaced at them.

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with you," said Etta. "And please stop talking about *me*. Are *you* definitely fixed up? What's Alice offered you?"

Marian grinned and swung a foot.

"A rather good job cooking for wealthy City gentlemen — conference lunches and so on — in that new skyscraper opposite Mansion House, and a nice fat salary, too. It ought to be amusing."

"Good for you. I must ring Alice Anderson and see what she's got for me," said Etta, and she stubbed out her cigarette and went out into the hall there and then to ring the college.

She returned to Marian pleased and with more sparkle.

"What do you know? Alice wants me to go tomorrow for an interview as cook-housekeeper at a gorgeous place on the river, near Bourne End — a Mr. and Mrs. Trender. He's a stockbroker and very well off apparently, runs a Mercedes-Benz. They keep a full-time daily, and a gardener. No house-work for me, only cooking and shopping. They're willing to pay twenty pounds a week and 'all found', as they say."

"Wow!" exclaimed Marian, wide-eyed, "that's twenty pounds in the pocket. But, darling, *Bourne End* — you couldn't work there and get back home every night. Commuting's out of the question."

"I agree, but if they like me they want me to live in. Nice big bed-sitter looking over the garden and the river, Alice says — my own T.V. and bathroom. Two days off during the week, so long as I work madly in the weekend when they usually entertain. And Sundays after lunch if I want."

"If you go, it means I shall lose you!" said Marian dismayed.

"I shall only be temporary, for a couple of months.

They've got some sort of couple from the Philippines lined up for permanence. They really need a butler as well as a cook, so Alice said, but Mrs. Trender has just had an accident and wants immediate help. A few days ago she was thrown from her horse and fractured an arm. Can't do a thing for herself. Alice says she never did much in the kitchen, anyhow. Alice thinks I'm the only one on her books who can cook well enough for the trendy Trenders. They asked for a nice type — do you think I'm a 'nice type'?"

Now Marian grinned — delighted because Etta herself was smiling for the first time since Rod went away. Thank goodness there was a spark of humour left in her, and taking everything into consideration it might be the best possible thing to get her right away from London and the old haunts. Marian asked:

"How long do you think it will be for?"

"May and June at least."

"Should be super on the river."

"If it doesn't rain. I know the river. It's gorgeous when the sun shines but it can be damp and a bit sad."

"You'll be in a nice hot kitchen where no doubt they have everything that opens and shuts," Marian said cheerfully.

"I wonder," said Etta, "what Mrs. Trender is like. Alice wants me to go down first thing tomorrow morning for an interview."

"Well, good luck to you, darling. It might be fun."

"It'll certainly be an experience," said Etta thoughtfully, and was suddenly amused to think of herself as a 'living-in cook-housekeeper'. It was a challenge and one needed to work for people who would appreciate good food — then one could really show off Cordon Bleu talent.

Feeling better, Etta walked into her bedroom. The first thing she saw drove a fresh dagger through her heart. Rod's photograph! She hadn't yet moved it from her

bedside table. She picked it up, put on her horn-rims, and studied the pictured face. It was an enlarged colour snapshot. Rodney was terribly handsome, Etta thought, and the old sense of loss and despair crept over her. He looked young for his twenty-five years. Sometimes she used even to think he was immature in his outlook, spoiled, a little greedy — but such fun; such a *wonderful* lover. He had marvellous, wicked blue eyes.

"Oh, damn, *damn*!" muttered Etta. "Why did you have to spoil everything, Rod?"

As she stared desolately at the photograph she could almost feel his kiss on her mouth. The sort of kiss that used to give her the sensation that her very bones were melting and that she was floating on air. *Damn him, and damn Claudia who had stolen him from her.*

Etta flung the framed snapshot into a drawer so violently that the glass shattered. She didn't bother just then to collect the pieces.

2

Etta's first encounter with the girl who was to be her future employer was nothing if not dramatic.

She arrived early at the Trender's house, Green Alders, which was within easy walking distance of Bourne End, on a really beautiful May morning. Chris Johnson had lent Etta her Mini. Etta drove through the tall wrought-iron gates that opened into the back garden, pulled up in the drive and was at once struck by the opulent beauty of the white house — Georgian, Etta thought — so dignified and lovely with its long square-paned windows, handsome portico, and walls covered with a mass of creeper. A pale pink clematis was just breaking into hundreds of blossoms around the two fine carved pillars at the entrance. Etta could imagine how perfect it must also be on the other side of the house which faced the water.

With all her love of beauty uppermost, Etta gave a sigh of satisfaction and gazed long at the green lawn and the banks of golden daffodils waving gently in the breeze. Striped blue-and-white blinds over the windows gave the house a Continental air. If the Trenders were as nice as their home, Etta thought, she would certainly enjoy living here for the next couple of months. She was about to press the bell when the front door suddenly opened and a girl — so small that at first Etta might have mistaken her for

a child — rushed out of the house. Long silky yellow hair half hid her face, but Etta saw that it was red, convulsed and streaming with tears. One of her arms was in a sling — *in a sling*. Heavens! Etta thought, this must be Mrs. Trender, herself. She had had that accident.

She did not seem to notice Etta or the car. She was very attractive — white jeans and striped sleeveless blue and white singlet. She wore white sandals with high cork heels. She screamed suddenly, "Let me go, you brute. Don't follow me. *Don't!* If you do, I'll throw myself into the river!"

Etta stared, flabbergasted. Now a tall young man rushed after the girl. A swift glance showed Etta that he had a fine-boned face and darkish hair, worn rather on the long side at the back and stylishly cut. Good-looking, Etta decided — nice figure. At the moment his face expressed nothing but alarm and distress. Etta went on staring. What on *earth* was happening? She had never felt more embarrassed. The young man now caught up with the blonde girl in the middle of the drive and pulled her back.

"Flair — steady on — *dearest* Flair — let me take you into the house. Darling, *for God's sake* don't be so idiotic!"

Goodness, thought Etta, these *are* the Trenders. Alice said her name was *Flair*.

What *was* it all about? And what a time for her to arrive — in the middle of a matrimonial row — one of no mean proportions, either!

There was a brief struggle between the two, then the blonde girl seemed to collapse. The tall young man lifted her into his arms and began to carry her back towards the house. He seemed to become aware for the first time of Etta standing beside the car. He flung her an embarrassed look.

"Sorry!" he said briefly, "Don't know who you are but do wait a moment, please. My wife's not well!"

The girl called Flair stirred, moaned in her husband's arms and beat her fists against his shoulders.

"I'm perfectly well, thank you. Let go of me. I hate you! Put me *down* Mark!"

Mark Trender carried her into the hall. Etta called after them, "Had I better go away?"

Then to her bewilderment, the hysterical Mrs. Trender lifted her golden head, drew a hand across her tear-smudged face and spoke to Etta quite normally, "No, don't go away, please. You must be our new cook. But how *super*."

Etta didn't know whether to smile or to be serious. She was thoroughly confused. She said, "My name's Etta — Henrietta Hughes. I've come for an interview. I'll come back later if you like."

Mark Trender looked at her apologetically. He certainly did not want her to go away. He, too, now realised who she was. They had expected her. Half Flair's trouble, in his belief, was that she had been trying to cope with too much, all the cooking and shopping and entertaining, and she was not used to it. She was not well either. Prone to attacks of nerves — at least that was what he liked to call her black moods.

"Do forgive us, Miss Hughes," he spoke to Etta — forcing a smile, "You've caught us at a bad moment. We are not really given to behaving like this."

"It's *his* fault, not *mine*!" declared Flair and giggled.

The suddenness of this switch from rage, tears and hatred to smiles and giggles, was too much for Etta. But she had to admit that when this strange girl with the broken arm chose to smile, all the charm in the world lay in her face and voice. She had perfect features and wonderful eyes. Crying hadn't spoilt their jewel-like lustre. They were turquoise-blue, fringed by the longest lashes Etta had ever seen. They must be her own. Etta decided.

because the ridiculous girl was rubbing them hard with her one good hand. They couldn't be false.

"Now, darling," said Mark Trender, "We must pull ouselves together. You know you don't hate me and that you don't want to throw yourself into the river. You've just been very upset and had a bad night with your poor arm, and you're worn out with so much work, my sweet."

Flair seemed disposed to melt. She hugged him, nuzzled one cheek against his, and kept a kittenish smiling glance on Etta.

"He's really rather a pet, isn't he?" she cooed, "He's not often cross with me and I can be *ghastly*!"

Etta said nothing. She was too baffled. She followed the pair into the house and shut the front door behind her. She was asked to wait in the drawing room while Mark carried his wife up to her bedroom. Flair announced that she would be down in a moment, after she had 'seen to her face'.

Etta came to the conclusion that she didn't much like Mrs. Mark Trender She must be thoroughly spoiled — a bit unbalanced, too. She couldn't be as ill or worn out as her husband said — he was covering up for her obviously. And now Etta began to wonder how many cooks had come here and left again because they couldn't cope with the hysterical Mrs. Trender.

Nevertheless, Etta was inclined to go ahead with her interview. Things might be rather interesting. Mark Trender was, she was sure, a terribly nice man. She could imagine some husbands being far less kind or tolerant of a wife's childish display of temper. It had been *so* nice, the way Mr. Trender had made excuses for his wife's behaviour.

Now the drawing room claimed her full attention. It was quite one of the loveliest she had ever seen. Huge picture windows gave a clear view of the river, shining and alluring on this sunny day. The velvety lawns were

beautifully kept and sloped to the water's edge. A smart white motor-boat was moored at the small landing-stage. Two green alders dipped their branches into the water and, perhaps, had given the house its name. The drawing room was long, L-shaped, the windowsills gay with flowering-plants. The Trenders obviously employed a full-time gardener. From two curved buttoned velvet sofas — deepest blue — one could sit in comfort and look across the lawn to the river. There were white wrought-iron tables and cushioned chairs under the awning that shaded the terrace. Etta was most of all intrigued by the décor in the long lovely room; particularly the rare shiny Chinese wall-paper, the wonderful blues and reds — and trees decorated with strange birds. There were beautiful Chinese rugs on the parquet floor. The room had taste and distinction and she guessed that some of the oriental black lacquered furniture must be old and valuable. Later she learned that Flair, under that childish feckless exterior was quite artistic. Her father was Italian, and many of the *objets d'art* in this house, including the beautiful paintings in the dining room in Florentine frames, had come from his villa in Rome.

Now the glass doors leading on to the terrace slid back, and a Siamese cat sprang into the room. A tall dark good-looking woman wearing a pink overall, followed.

"Sirikit — naughty girl — Sirikit — come *here*!"

She dashed in, picked up the Siamese, who mewed protestingly, and tucked it under her arm. Then she stared at Etta.

"Oh, sorry — I didn't know anybody was here. Sirikit's my cat. She was given to me. Did you ever hear such a name? They say it's after some Egyptian Princess who had the same sort of green eyes. I'm Mrs. Box — the daily here."

"Hullo," said Etta, "I'm Miss Hughes. Actually I've come about the job as cook."

Mrs. Box smiled at the slim dark-haired girl who was so well dressed and attractive.

"Well, that's a surprise I must say! But I'm pleased to meet you. Maybe you'd like a cuppa in a minute. Sirikit always comes to work with me — won't be parted. But she's not allowed in *this* room."

"I must say it's very striking and original."

Mrs. Box, stroking her Siamese, drew nearer to Etta and spoke in a low voice. "There's been a bit of a carry-on here this morning. Maybe you heard them. It's always *her*, not him. They say it's her Italian blood. She gets into such a state about nothing. He's very nice, Mr. Trender is. But he has a time with her —"

Etta interrupted, "Never mind."

Mark Trender suddenly appeared.

"Good morning, Mrs. Box," he greeted the daily with a friendly smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Trender," she said, flung Etta a knowing look, and walked out of the room with her cat.

Mark picked up a small Dresden china box which he handed to Etta. "Do you smoke?"

"Yes, please — though not when I'm cooking," Etta smiled. She took a cigarette and he flicked on his lighter.

"I'll get Mrs. B. to make you a cup of coffee in a moment."

"Please don't trouble —" she began.

"But of course. I'd like one myself. I really ought to be up in town but I decided to catch a later train — it's such a lovely day."

Etta, being intuitive, imagined that this decision was made because Mark Trender had been faced with his wife's hysterical outburst. She wondered how often he had to deal with such problems.

Now that he was standing close to her she decided that he was not strictly handsome. His face was too lean. The skin looked taut over the bones. But he had fine dark eyes.

Etta was quick to note that they held a look of repressed suffering. His mouth was gentle but firm. There was a quiet strength about him. His was an interesting face, Etta decided, one not easily forgotten. He must be in his late twenties, but could be older. A man, Etta decided, who would hide his real feelings.

He motioned her to one of the sofas.

"Do sit down and tell me about yourself."

She chose one of the deep cushioned armchairs and gave him a few details about her studies in the Alice Anderson Domestic College and her present need of a post.

He said, "My wife was told by Miss Anderson that you were one of her best pupils."

"Oh, I don't know about that."

"Well, anyhow, if you can come to us, you'll be a godsend. We've had rather too many failures. All the best cook-housekeepers seem either to have retired or be still in jobs they've held for years. We had one not long ago who served up an unspeakable dinner on her first night and left the next morning telling us she found the work too hard. Just the two of us to cook for that night, mind you! Then we got a religious maniac who warned us we were going straight to hell because we had alcohol in the cupboard. She left at *our* request. And there were others. We're longing to get settled. Flair — my wife — is not really domesticated and she hates cooking. She's not that type, if you know what I mean. She prefers riding or driving — and skiing in the season," he ended awkwardly.

Etta knew exactly what he meant. He was covering up for a selfish spoiled wife.

"I adore cooking, so it's not hard work for me," she said. "That is if I could have help if there happens to be a big dinner party."

"Fair enough. My wife can generally get a local waitress when we have a party, and we expect a regular maid to

help you very soon. It's the good cooks who seem to be the jewels beyond price."

Now Etta gave him one of her nicest smiles. It lit up her pale sad face and made her eyes sparkle. He felt encouraged. Miss Hughes was quite charming. She had a sense of humour, too. Perhaps Flair had found 'the jewel' at last.

At first meeting Mark had thought Etta a little aloof and unfriendly. Now he could see he was wrong. Her greeny-hazel eyes were beautiful and soft. He wondered why she had chosen an occupation which kept her in the kitchen.

She told him. "I've taken on this sort of work because I've always been interested in cooking. My mother was quite a chef. When I was a child she used to let me help her with her special dishes. In fact I learned a lot before I ever went to the Anderson College. My father, too, was a gourmet. I've inherited their interest in food," Etta gave Mark her charming smile again.

"Flair will be delighted to hear all this," murmured Mark. He began to feel that already he knew enough about Miss Hughes to satisfy him. "Forgive me for a moment, I'll just run up and see if my wife is coming down."

He was very tactful about Mrs. Trender, thought Etta. Despite her dislike of listening to idle gossip, she remembered that Mrs Box had just said: "It's her — not him." Well, Etta had seen that for herself.

Her thoughts turned to Rod — the man whose image once so important and thrilling, she still carried in her mind and heart. How would *he* have reacted if she had behaved like Flair? Almost impossible, of course, to imagine herself running out of Rod's house screaming, threatening to drown herself. But how for instance, would Rod have coped with a wife like Flair? Etta thought, he would have said — okay, go on — drown yourself! (Taking

it for granted that she would never do it. And he would have been right.) He wouldn't have carried her gently back into the house and excused her. How different men were! Rod was hard — Mark Trender obviously was not. For all Rod's charm there used to be a touch of cruelty in him. Etta knew it. He was such a masculine type — possessive, demanding. Mark perhaps ought to be a little tougher with his wife. Yet, looking at his face, she could have sworn there was strength in it — in him.

A few moments later Mark came back with Flair.

Etta stood up. Looking at the pair she was intrigued. Flair had switched so suddenly from hysteria to charm and friendliness. She had changed into a chic trouser-suit — daffodil yellow with a white and brown shirt and wide gay tie. This time the yellow hair was tied back with a big black bow. She looked enchanting and she was all smiles and dimples, hanging affectionately on to her husband's arm as though she had never screamed at him in her life.

"Hullo!" she held out her hand to Etta. "I do apologise for keeping you waiting, Miss — er — "

"Henrietta Hughes," Etta supplied the name, "Etta to everyone."

"Miss Hughes or Etta then — such an unusual name — do sit down. I've told Mrs. Box, our daily, to bring us a cup of coffee. Afraid I was rather long tarting myself up but I've only got one arm now that works so I take ages to do my hair. Good thing it was the left one that got fractured, isn't it?"

"Very good indeed," Etta agreed.

Mark with a quick look at his wrist-watch, put an arm around his wife's slender shoulders and said, "Darling, I've decided to catch the twelve o'clock. I'm due at a business lunch in the City and I really ought to go. Would you mind?"

She gave him a ravishing smile — turquoise eyes dancing. "Of course not, darling, I can talk to Etta and give her some lunch, too, if she doesn't mind something out of the deep-freeze. Old Boxy-Boo can rake up a meat-salad. She's rather good with that sort of thing."

Etta glanced at Mark and read the relief on his face.

Mark Trender was in fact more than relieved — thankful that Miss Hughes had turned up at this psychological moment. She seemed so quiet, so efficient. He hoped Flair would engage her.

He'd been having a thin time since Flair woke up this morning in one of her worst moods. The sort he had grown to dread. She seemed capable these days of changing so swiftly and cruelly from the docile beguiling young girl he had fallen so much in love with, into a little wild cat. And that was putting it mildly.

He'd been married to her for two years. For the first year things had gone well. He could never quite understand why she became such a different girl. Impossible now if she couldn't get her own way. And much as he loved her there was a streak in Mark which would not let him altogether become a hen-pecked husband. The intimidated type he despised. At first, when they were engaged, Mark used to be amused by her stories of her Venetian father losing his temper at times and creating havoc in the home, or how speedily he could return to charm and sweetness and beguile his family again.

Flair had inherited his character. But Mark was determined to preserve his integrity and pride. When he faced up to the dark unpredictable sides of her nature, he was shaken but ended generally by forgiving her. She was so devilishly attractive once her good humour was restored and he had not made up his mind that she was really cruel — only a spoiled child who needed tolerance. But disillusion had of course set in. She had definitely killed the blind love he had once felt for her. By nature he

was a peace-loving man. He hated rows. To him they were murderous — especially if they took place in public and she all too often created scenes in front of their friends.

How had he failed? Or need he blame himself at all? She was too febrile, too lacking in self-control. Her own father — on their wedding day, in their beautiful Venetian villa, had put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Be patient with her, my boy. She's like her dear dead mother, who was what you English people call a *handful* — yes?"

True enough — Flair had proved more than a handful for Mark. Now he had to admit she had begun to drink just a little too much and too often. He dreaded their parties because she was always worse after champagne. He was conscious of acute irritation within himself because he felt that through her he was losing much of his former good humour and independence of spirit. He had begun to retreat behind a barrier of self-defence.

He had hoped they would have a child and a family life. He had wanted fatherhood. But Flair was on the Pill and firmly refused to have a baby for another two or three years. Looking back, as Mark often did unhappily, he could see that she had lied when she had told him during their engagement that she was crazy to have a baby as soon as possible. No! all she wanted was fun — fun, all the time, and her husband as an adoring slave.

But there was something in Mark which would not allow him to be too slavish to any human being. And for a great many personal reasons he tried to remain tolerant with Flair. Physically he still found her alluring. But she was becoming too difficult, and it all seemed too unrewarding. The way she swung from sweetness and gaiety to being that other Flair who could become a little virago, had exhausted his patience.

As he left the house that day and drove himself to the station, he tried to escape from his ugly reflections, and

curiously enough the one bright spot in all the trouble seemed to be the prospect of that nice girl, Henrietta Hughes, coming to work for them — a cook-housekeeper in a thousand! Maybe, he thought, cynically, she would help to make Green Alders seem more like a home and less like a battlefield.

3

Left alone with Flair, Etta was subject to the second interview of the morning — this time from somebody who probed much more inquisitively into her personal affairs than Mark Trender had done.

While drinking coffee on the sunlit terrace, Flair seemed in high spirits, gaily questioned Etta, treated her as a new-found friend rather than a prospective employee.

"It's marvellous to have someone who isn't only good at cooking but is the sort of person I can gossip with now and again. I do get bored sometimes even when Markie is here. I hate the old Stock Exchange. He's mad about it, but of course, he has to make more money, doesn't he?" she ended with her high-pitched childish laughter.

Etta murmured a suitable reply. She looked at the amber-haired pretty girl with her fabulous eyes and tiny, perfect figure and thought how different she looked now from the furious, sobbing young creature who had rushed out of the house an hour ago.

Flair referred to this incident as though it was a joke.

"You must have thought me quite crazy. I know I get myself into fearful frenzies at times. I expect you were horrified."

"Not really," Etta murmured. She could think of nothing else to say.

"I don't suppose *you* would ever lose your self-control, would you? You seem the placid sort."

Etta felt her cheeks grow hot. Marian accused her of being over-emotional.

"Oh, everyone's capable of losing their self-control at times," she said.

"Oh, but not you, surely. Something just happens to me and when I get really annoyed I *snap*," Flair flicked her fingers. "Then I just go up in smoke."

"That's what they call being an extrovert," said Etta smiling and added, "I wish I were one. I'm too *in*troverted. Things get locked up inside me. I worry but don't admit it," she ended, laughing.

And she had a swift mental vision of herself on the day Rod had told her that all was over between them, that their wedding would never take place, and that he loved Claudia. She had wanted to scream — to sob — to behave like a lunatic. But she had stayed dumb — like a frozen thing as she listened to his stumbling excuses. It was pretty grim, she thought, to be the sort who suffers in silence Perhaps Flair was lucky because she could get it all out of her system.

Flair went on chattering. She never stopped, which, as Etta was soon to learn, was one of the reasons why Mark said so little when she was present.

"If you come to us and you liked it here and we were all happy, couldn't you make it a permanency?" suddenly Flair asked, "I do need a permanent cook, and I've really taken such a liking to you, Etta."

Etta hesitated. She wasn't quite sure how she would fit in with this household — or if she could cope with such a surcharged atmosphere. She wasn't sure how to answer. Flair, true to type, opened her blue eyes wide, and made a melting appeal. She wanted Etta. Somehow she knew this girl would be the answer to her prayers. "Oh, if we

get on, do please, *please* say you'll stay on. It would be *super*!"

"But I thought you had a couple of Philippines lined up, or something — " began Etta, feeling awkward and undecided.

"Oh, that's all fallen through," Flair said airily, "I forgot to tell Miss Anderson, but I had a letter yesterday to say the pair who had been recommended changed their minds. Now, Etta, you won't have to do anything but cook. I promise you a washer-upper and I'm on the track of a Swiss daily help who lives in Marlow, and anything else you want, you can have."

Now Etta laughed. One really had to treat this girl as one would a crazy child.

"Do wait and see if you like my cooking, or like *me* being around the place at all, before I say 'yes' to a permanency," she begged, "You might find I'm not the right person at all."

Flair pouted.

"You're not going to get married, are you? *Are* you engaged?"

Even Flair, self-absorbed though she was, now noticed the change on Miss Hughes' face. It was as though a shutter came down. She closed up.

"No, I am not," she said coldly.

Curiosity got the better of Flair's diplomacy.

"But you're so attractive — you must have lots of boy-friends, haven't you?"

Etta was silent. The old anguish swept through her for a second. She locked her fingers tightly together, but she smiled. "No," she said, "not for the moment. I was — engaged once. But no longer."

"Well, you're lucky to be free. Marriage isn't all it's made out to be," said Flair, grimacing.

"I think your husband is terribly nice."

"Oh, Mark's nice, yes," said Flair, "Sometimes *too* nice. You know what I mean."

Etta was silent again — baffled and a little uncomfortable. She was to discover at a later date that behind her pretty 'dolly' façade Flair of the long fair hair and dewy-eyes had a steely determination to organise her husband and everyone else and get her own way. Etta had always considered herself quite an organiser but she remained speechless just listening to Flair during the next half-hour. Then, having discovered that Etta was neither engaged nor likely to be, Flair whisked her off to the kitchen, showed her round and tried to settle the domestic arrangements.

Etta had little fault to find with this model kitchen — beautiful, expensive, right-up-to-date, all pale blue and bronze — with copper pots and pans on the shelves; cleverly-made units, an electric cooker, a refrigerator, a dish-washer, drawers full of the best tea-towels, cupboards packed with tinned delicacies. Every kind of gadget that any cook could desire. A room where it could be warm if it was a cool day and cool if it was too hot. The casement windows were gay with floral, fringed blinds. Leading through an arch she could see a blue table, cushioned chairs, a T.V. and a sofa. The perfect private sitting room and dining alcove combined, for the staff.

"It's all great!" Etta exclaimed, "Most comfortable."

"Anything more you want just ask for it," Flair said gaily. "And I'm sure your cooking will be super, Cordon Bleu I hear!"

"Yes," Etta smiled, "I'll do my best, Mrs. Trender."

"Good for you, dear. Well, I can't boil an egg properly," was Flair's airy response. "When we've been left alone at times poor Markie has had to swallow food out of tins."

I should think he has a poor deal most of the time, thought Etta.

She was then taken upstairs to see her future bedroom. It was large and well-furnished with Swedish wood furni-

ture, green carpet, and green-and-white flowered curtains. A writing-table and bookcase faced the windows with a lovely view across an apple orchard to the shining ribbon of the river. A super room, Etta was to tell Marian when she described it — very far removed from the kind of wretchedly appointed attics occupied by the unfortunate domestics of the past century. It really wasn't bad being a cook-housekeeper in the 1970s. A bathroom to herself, next door — rose-pink tiles, black vanity table with pink basin and a big pink bath. Hot towel rail and fleecy towels even for the staff.

"You *will* take the job permanently, *won't* you?" Mrs. Trender asked in that breathless way she had of speaking. And the starry pleading expression she used when she wanted her own way. Etta suddenly found herself saying, "Yes, if we suit each other, Mrs. Trender, I will."

"Then don't go home, today. Stay *now* — please."

Etta blinked.

"I can't possibly — all my things — "

"I'll send a car for them," broke in Flair, "We have a local chauffeur who'll always come if he's needed."

Some people *are* lucky, thought Etta, somewhat bewildered by this driving-force from Mrs. Trender, but she was firm about getting back to London. She must pack and leave some order behind her she said. Also she had borrowed a friend's car. She must return it, and say goodbye to her great friend Marian.

Flair was disappointed but finally gave way — provided she said, Etta promised to come back to Green Alders tomorrow. To this, Etta agreed.

"You see," sighed Flair, "I know you're right for this job and I just *can't* do without someone like you, Etta. Can we call you that? My silly hysteria this morning was because I'm so exhausted trying to cope with the house. Then there was my silly accident, too. I've been unlucky. There are so many nice things I want to do and I'll be

free once you're in charge. We have a gorgeous motor-boat. I go out on the river with my friends when it's fine, and I have heaps of invitations I've had to turn down just because I've been so pinned to the house."

Etta thought with some irony that it was obvious that Mrs. Mark Trender did very little domestic work — even when Mrs. Box held the fort alone. Mrs. Mark Trender was a 'good-time girl' and no mistake.

When she finally drove home from Green Alders, Etta felt a trifle confused.

"Flair is an extraordinary mixture," she told Marian that evening, "Soft as butter and sweet as honey one minute — ruthless and egotistical the next. And, as I saw for myself, a little fiend when she's crossed."

Marian had listened to her friend's report on the new job with some misgivings.

"It may turn out to be amusing, of course, but are you sure you feel like coping with this girl? She sounds a bit much to me."

Etta recalled Mark's lean tired face and those dark fine eyes. The eyes of a man whose spirit was imprisoned in the depths of despair, yet still unconquered — and unconquerable. He fascinated her. She said,

"The husband is the one I'm sorry for. I think I agreed to take the post more in order to help him out than to help my fair lady. She just bullies him, and although he obviously resents it he seems to have some mysterious reason for letting her get away with it. But I'm sure he needs me there to take a firm hand — which is more than he does."

"Well, good luck to you, darling," said Marian, "at least it sounds from your description of the place that you'll enjoy your comforts."

"Oh, it's a superb place. I'm mad about the décor in the Chinese salon."

"Why haven't the other cooks stayed, do you think?"

"Possibly they couldn't cope because Mrs. Trender could be rude and impossible in a bad mood."

"And will you put up with it if she takes it out on you?"

Etta thought of Green Alders and all that went with it.

"I think I could cope," she said slowly, "I'll just get on with my work and refuse to take part in any rows that take place when I'm around."

"Well, I must say they're lucky to be getting you, Etta."

Etta was left to wonder how lucky *she* would be down at Green Alders. But on a cloudless May morning, she drove down to Bourne End in the big hired car Flair had sent for her.

The first evening was difficult. Flair was pleasant enough — she personally welcomed Etta when she arrived. There were beautiful white tulips in the housekeeper's room.

Etta admired her delightful bed-sitting room. The tulips looked so elegant against the deep green of the chintzes. Everything was in perfect taste. The cook-housekeeper was lucky in that respect. Etta particularly liked the fine reproduction of Van Gogh's painting at Arles, which hung over the fireplace. Mrs. Box had something to say about that, too.

"*She* took away the picture that was there. She said you'd be the kind to prefer this."

Etta raised her brows and nodded. Flair *was* a queer one and no mistake.

After Mrs. Box left, Etta unpacked. She put out a few favourite books and the photograph of her mother, when young. A beautiful serious face — Etta resembled her. Etta's father had often described her as a most gentle creature, easily hurt. In that, too Etta was like her. As she settled down in her new room, she thought about her childhood. How fond she had been of her parents. Her father was a hard-working doctor; their home a comfortable little

Victorian house in a Sussex village. It had been such a pleasant world, Etta remembered — with herself as the main attraction. She was an only child.

She remembered school-holidays by the sea, and occasional trips to France, to Etta, all so blissful and exciting. Christmas was a marvellous time; birthdays never forgotten, and Etta had lacked little during her adolescent years. Then had come the tragedy which finished that phase of her life, and darkened her whole horizon.

Just before her thirteenth birthday, her mother fell victim to one of these sudden terrifying cancers. It had ended her life. Despite all her husband's love and care and the excellent surgeon who had operated on her she had died. Etta was stunned and heart-broken.

Dr. Hughes grieved with his daughter — but life had to go on. He was as kind and attentive to her as his busy life allowed, but the child overnight had become an adult, and no longer a stranger to tears.

Then Peggy Hughes, an unmarried cousin of the doctor's came to live with them She was a capable housekeeper if not much of a cook. James Hughes was grateful for her presence in the house and glad for Etta who needed a woman's care.

Cousin Peg, as she was called, performed the domestic chores efficiently for some time. But at forty-five and having always been rather plain and stupid and without much interest in sex (and no man had been interested in her) she was a dull companion. Etta found nothing in common with her.

After two more years of Peg running the establishment, Dr. Hughes, being sensible to his daughter's real needs, decided she would be better at a good boarding school where she would have friends her own age and find more outlet for her intelligence. He sent her to a big school which catered for music-lovers, and there, Etta learned to play tolerably well. But she realised long before she left school,

that she would never be good enough to make music her profession.

Then suddenly her father married again. This time, to a rather amusing and attractive ex-actress of his own age. Etta did not suffer from the usual resentment. She was far too mature and sensible, and was not at all jealous. She knew Daddy needed a companion — certainly not poor Cousin Peg for the rest of his life.

But Etta was to see little in future of Sheila, her gay blonde stepmother — or of her father — for when the time came for her to leave school, Dr. Hughes bought a new practice down in the West Country. He and his wife moved out of Etta's orbit.

She could go and stay with them when she liked, but she wanted something more — a real interest in life. It was then that she revived an affection for cooking and went to the Alice Anderson College. At the same time, she moved into a flat with Marian who had become her closest friend.

Then her first serious love affair altered her whole outlook. She met Rodney Stone and gave him all that was warm and deep and loving in her make-up. Gave — as she was to discover — much more than he deserved.

Sometimes Etta looked at her mother's lovely pictured face and decided that even though Mummy had been so much more beautiful than she could ever be, she had inherited her unfortunate capacity for suffering. Down here in this gorgeous house with quite a lot of interesting things to look forward to, the old pain threatened her again. The anguish of losing Rodney Rod who was living now with Claudia — the *other* girl — the girl he had preferred to ***her.***

Scalding tears suddenly stung Etta's eyelids. She wiped them quickly away and told herself not to be a fool, she must think now only of her job. Flair was not going to be in for lunch She was out with friends for the day,

and there would just be the two Trenders in for dinner tonight.

"I thought you'd like a chance to settle in and give us a small meal," Flair had said when they discussed the day's menu. "Do just anything you like — I'm sick to death of thinking about food," and she added that anything Etta wanted she could order from Mr. Bench, the grocer. His shop was within easy walking distance, or Etta could phone for things to be sent. "And don't stint butter, cream or wine for cooking," she ended.

So Etta, tongue in cheek, decided to be extravagant and to put up a recherché little dinner tonight for her new employers.

At six o'clock when Mark Trender came home, he put a head in the kitchen and sniffed. "Hullo — I say! — Superb odours — something good and tempting."

Etta, who was at the big shining cooker stirring a special sauce, turned and smiled at Mark. "I hope it will tempt you, Mr. Trender."

"I must say it's very nice to come back and find you installed," he said politely, but she felt sure he was sincere.

She looked around the handsome kitchen with a growing pride. "This is such a wonderful kitchen to cook in. Would you like ice for cocktails, and a few slices of lemon, Mr. Trender?"

"I'll get the ice if you're busy — " he began.

"Of course not," she broke in, "It's all part of my job."

"Can I bring you a glass of sherry?"

"No, really, not now."

"Perhaps a little later, and do you like a little wine with your meal? We generally crack a bottle."

"No wine, thanks awfully, and I don't eat much at night," said Etta, "I'm not really used to it."

Mark found suddenly that he was disappointed because she would not be at the dinner table. But, of course, he must remember cooks ate meals at the little table by the

window in their sitting room. A bit lonely he imagined but no doubt she was used to it. What *he* wasn't used to was a cook like Miss Hughes. It seemed wrong for instance that he shouldn't ask her to come into the loggia and have a drink. She was so agreeable and intelligent and she looked so nice — slim and graceful, and smart in her white overall.

After she had given him the ice, and the lemon-slices on a crystal dish he asked if she had any idea what time Mrs. Trender expected to be home.

"I'm afraid I haven't. She just told me she'd be in for dinner," said Etta.

"Till later, then," said Mark and went away.

Etta busied herself again with the special sauce for the veal and mushroom *vol-au-vents*. It was a quarter past six. The Trenders dined at eight. Plenty of time to prepare the rest of the meal. Tonight's meal was a challenge which pleased Etta. She needed to reassure herself that she could do this sort of job.

She had made one of her favourite sweets — white peaches with toasted brown sugar and strips of orange peel, soaked in Cointreau. A cut-glass dish with the sweet in it was ready, and chilling in the big refrigerator.

At half past seven Etta made an omelette for her supper and ended with a large cup of coffee (thank goodness the Trenders bought the best coffee beans and she could grind them, and make superlative coffee in their French percolator). Coffee was the drink Etta enjoyed most. Rod used to say how well she made it.

Stop thinking about Rod, she told herself fiercely, and swallowed the rest of her supper without much relish.

Time went by. At eight o'clock Mrs. Trender had still not come home. At nine, Mark appeared in the kitchen again — as anxious about his wife as Etta was about her dinner. The pastry in particular would spoil. It would be disappointing if the first meal she cooked at Green Alders was to be ruined. What *was* keeping Mrs. Trender?

4

Flair was exactly an hour and a quarter late. By this time, Etta for all her natural good humour, was a bit put out and muttered every time she looked at the food. It was being kept hot, but none the better for it. Several times Mark put his head in the doorway and apologised. When Etta said it was quite all right, he made it plain that he didn't agree, and apart from that, he was worried.

"There are so many accidents these days," he said, explaining his anxiety.

Etta tried tactfully to reassure him. "Perhaps it's just traffic jams — she'll be here any moment."

Mark smiled.

"You really are nice. The average cook would be fuming. You could, of course, hand in your notice!"

"How do you know I won't?" she laughed.

"Have a cigarette," he laughed with her. She shook her head. She didn't smoke while she was cooking, she said. They would scarcely appreciate it if the ash got mixed up with the sauce.

"I'm getting hungry," he said and frowned up at the electric clock.

"Can I give you a snack to stave off the pangs?" she asked.

"No, I won't spoil my appetite."

Then they both heard the crunch of car wheels on the gravel drive. Etta hastened to switch on the electric oven to re-heat the main dish. Mark hurried to the front door. Flair, however, who had forgotten her latch key, came into the house through the back entrance — and not alone. A slim young man with fair curly hair touching his shoulders, and wearing bright blue pants, a trendy shirt and wide tie, followed her. At first sight, when he and Flair appeared at the kitchen door, Etta had thought *he* was a girl. Then she heard his voice. That was masculine enough. He looked into the kitchen at the electric clock.

"God — we're terribly late, Flair," he said.

She chuckled, "Who cares? Life should be timeless. Never look at clocks, sweetie. I can't bear all this must-have-dinner-at-eight." Then she came face to face with Etta. Flair's hair was untidy, her cheeks flushed and her great eyes were glittering. She advanced, carrying a large bunch of drooping flowers. She grinned a trifle foolishly at Etta.

"*Hullo* there! If it isn't our nice Miss Henrietta Hughes. Tony, meet Miss Hughes. I think I'll call her *Henry*. Henry darling, meet my greatest friend, Tony — otherwise Sir Anthony Durrance. He plays the guitar better than anybody I know — don't you, Tony darling?"

Etta stared. Flair's speech was slurred and her steps unsteady. As for the fair-haired youth with his pasty face and girlish hair, he was a type Etta couldn't abide. She felt suddenly angry with Mrs. Trender. She spoke coldly.

"I'm sorry I can't chat. I'm rather busy dishing up now and — "

"Oh, darling Henry, please forgive us," cried Flair dramatically, and approaching Etta put out the arm that wasn't in a sling and patted Etta's shoulder. At the same time she shook the bouquet of flowers. Some of the petals fell on to the floor, "Put these in water when you've got time," she added, "We'd better go and tidy up. Tony,

you know the geography, go and wash, there's a good boy. I expect there won't be much time for drinkies, now."

Etta's heart beat faster. She was flushed and annoyed and far from impressed by Flair's attempt to be familiar. Etta felt still a complete stranger here. Flair had obviously had too much champagne.

Now Mark joined the group in the kitchen doorway. Etta saw him take one look at his pretty dishevelled wife and another at Sir Anthony Durrance.

It was only the next morning when Etta mentioned the name to the well-informed Mrs. Box that she heard that Sir Anthony was supposed to be 'Madam's boy-friend' (not that that meant anything these days). Etta also learned that he was a baronet, an only son who was due to inherit a lot of money, and was always getting into trouble. There had been driving offences and one rumour said that he was once in a certain London flat when it was raided for drugs. Mrs. Box however couldn't confirm this and Etta was soon to learn that very few such stories were wholly true. Of course, there was no smoke without fire, and this evening Etta took a rather poor view of the blond and trendy Sir Anthony. Too much money, no sense, and obviously he was dead-nuts on Mrs. Mark Trender.

Mark, Etta thought, handled the situation coolly — bade Tony a brief 'hullo', put a steadying hand on his wife's arm (Etta was sure he had noticed her condition), told them both to hurry up and get ready for dinner and then (forestalling Flair), asked Etta if she could manage another one for dinner.

"Yes, of course," was her answer. "It might just mean no second helpings, Mr. Trender."

"Thanks awfully," he said, relieved.

Flair giggled and disengaged herself from her husband's supporting arm. "Tony and I've been at Arabella's. It was a terrific party and that's why we're so late. We just

couldn't get away. She kept pouring drinkies down our throats and making us eat her bits-and-pieces, then on the way home Tony tried to pass a lorry, and it's a wonder we weren't killed, but he dropped behind just in time — " (more giggles) — "And it was bad luck because there was a police car behind us and a nasty policeman came and took Tony's name and address. He only lost his licence last week so I don't know what they'll do to him this time. You'll have to drive him home later on, Markie."

It was obvious to Etta that Mark was now very angry but he controlled his voice. He said quietly, "I won't go out again. Tony can ring up a taxi. Please be quick, darling, dinner's been waiting since heaven knows when and it's rather bad luck on our chef — her first night here. She was hoping to show us what she could do and — "

"Oh, don't be tiresome, darling," broke in Flair, "and please don't give us a lecture. *You* aren't angry with me, are you, Henry?" she called out to Etta. "You seem so cool."

Etta was strangely irritated by her familiarity and the name 'Henry'. But she answered, "Okay, Mrs. Trender. I'll take the first course through in five minutes."

From the start things were a bit tricky. Etta's dinner was not all she meant it to be. Her usually exquisite pastry had hardened with keeping. The vegetables had suffered, and the only thing she could be proud of was the peach-and-orange sweet which was none the worse for prolonged chilling.

During dinner, when she apologised for her failure, Mark looked distressed and immediately assured her that the food was marvellous. Flair didn't even look at her. She was too busy talking — seldom giving anyone else the chance to speak. Etta thought how sad it was for Mark that things should be this way.

The dining room was charming with its Italian green marble-topped table, laid with black mats, the fine silver,

the gleaming Venetian goblets. The tall candelabra, pale yellow carpet, high-backed gilded chairs with yellow satin cushions, all very effective. Etta found the décor more than elegant; white and gold, chestnut coloured chiffon curtains falling from gilt carved pelmets, and a beautiful painting of a canal in Venice over a white marble fireplace.

What a fortune the Trenders must have spent on this house, Etta thought not for the first time, and what a shame that this girl Flair who had been given all this should be so self-absorbed, so unappreciative of her husband, so much more interested in the brainless boy she had brought back tonight.

Some people have no luck and I think Mark Trender is one of the unlucky ones [Etta wrote to Marian the next day].

I suppose I shouldn't have taken it to heart but I really did when I saw how upset he was that my first dinner was spoiled. Flair Trender is abominably selfish. How she can be so keen on the baronet I don't know. He played his guitar after dinner. I could hear it. He was quite good but I think that's about as far as his intelligence gets him. I don't know what sort of an evening they had after I'd cleared the coffee away because I went to bed. Mark came out just as I was going upstairs and said how sorry he was I'd had to do all the work. Of course I told him it was okay and nothing.

I don't reckon the wretched man was allowed to go to bed until midnight because I woke up much later and heard her arguing with him in the corridor — telling him off because he'd ordered a taxi for Tony. She said he ought to have driven Tony to Marlow. But why *should* a tired businessman turn out like that? I've found out that Master Tony is only twenty-one. A lot younger than Mark.

If Mark wasn't so awfully nice I would have told

Mrs. Trender straightaway that it isn't the sort of job I want, but I have a funny sort of feeling I must stay a bit longer, just to help *him*. I daresay I can help her, too. Of course when she woke up which wasn't until long after he had left for the City, she was as bright as a button and you'd never have thought she had had a *drop* too much. She was full of praise for me, telling me how marvellous I was and how Tony said I was the best cook they'd had for years and a lot of nonsense. She *will* call me *Henry*! I'll have to get used to it, I suppose. I don't want to seem stuffy. Sometimes you know, Marian, I think she needs a good spanking. Mark is far too lenient, although at moments he tells her where she gets off. I've seen his mouth tighten and his eyes flash but he controls his temper — he's really rather super.

So here I am and here at Green Alders I look like staying for the time being. I must say it has its amusing side. Mark said goodbye to me after breakfast and assured me that Mrs. Trender was going to do her best to get a Swiss girl or some sort of person who would do the jobs that Mrs. Box doesn't like, and so leave me free to do the catering and entertaining. Mrs. B. is really only for the rough work. She 'obliges' if she is asked, but she goes at five-thirty at the latest. Do tell me what you think of it all . . .

Marian's answer was immediate, "Maybe your new mission in life, dear, is to help Mark along his thorny path and Flair along her alcoholic one. If you're happy down there, stick to it. It sounds fascinating."

As time went on Etta began to feel that she was really being helpful to both her employers, for different reasons. What went on between them in private she naturally did not know, but she could well believe Mark was the loser.

During the month that followed, Etta found that she was too busy to sit down and grieve for Rod. His image

was beginning to grow less vivid. She no longer woke up to find the tears pouring down her cheeks nor felt the intense pain of their parting. After a day's cooking at Green Alders, she found she could sleep like a log, and wake up refreshed — ready for another day.

She was surprised to find that she somehow became part of the Trender household without difficulty. Soon she was in no hurry to change her job. She had more help with the entertaining. Marie-Claire, a Swiss woman who lived in Marlow, arrived on the scene for two hours every afternoon when Etta was off-duty, then stayed for the evening meal.

Etta found the frequent parties no trouble. Flair's friends and a few of Mark's business associates often turned up unexpectedly, and Etta had the chance to show off her Cordon Bleu capabilities.

Marie-Claire was a youngish widow who had been a domestic in her youth. She lived only a short bus ride from Green Alders and reached the house soon after Mrs. Box left. Marie-Claire was of a nervous disposition and begged to be excused from waiting at table. Etta organised things so that she saw to the dining room while Marie-Claire dished up. Etta even began to find this amusing.

She said to Marian, "I enjoy being a parlour-maid for a few minutes. I like to see the guests. It's really quite fun, especially when one of the men catches my eye and gives me *that* sort of look — *you know*!"

"I know, honey," was Marian's laughing response, "and I bet they wish they could date you."

Marian was delighted to see her beloved friend looking so much more contented. Obviously the job at Green Alders was a success.

Flair continued to annoy and amuse Etta alternately. She was always at her most gay and delightful when there were amusing people around her. She was out a lot. Etta — the watcher in the background — knew what to expect

from Mrs. Trender now. She was pleasant to her husband as long as he didn't try to exert his authority too firmly. If he did she became odious and Etta could have slapped her. Yet she could be charming — and generous.

She embarrassed Flair by constantly giving her presents — perfume, cosmetics, a lovely scarf from Hermes, all the things that were too expensive for Etta to buy. And when she protested, Flair — as usual — got her own way.

"Henry, don't dare refuse," she would say, "You look after me. Why shouldn't I be nice to you?" Then perhaps she would ignore Etta and the kitchen for days.

As she couldn't for the moment ride or drive because of her injured arm, Flair was constantly called for by Tony in a hired car (for which she paid), or by another of her friends. She dashed up to town, going from one swinging party to another.

The parties Flair held in her own home gave Etta plenty to do. But the sound of music, and laughing voices, the barbecues, the buffet-suppers or recherché little dinners were all fun, and in the day's work. Etta had been trained for such things. She never grumbled. The guests often drifted into the kitchen to tell her how 'smashing' or how 'terrific' the food had been.

Whenever she was up in the flat on her off-days, Marian took special note of the fact that Etta never now spoke about Rodney — or if she did, it was without emotion.

"I sometimes wonder how Rod is getting on with his Claudia," once she remarked.

"Being thoroughly nagged at and wishing he had never behaved so stupidly," was Marian's reply.

Etta actually laughed.

"I can't say I can ever see Rod allowing a girl to nag him. I expect Claudia is making him very happy."

"Who cares? I don't and I hope you don't these days."

"I don't! I can see now all right that it would never

have worked for us. But don't let's talk about him. I doubt if I'll ever come across him again."

"Who have you met that you like down at Green Alders — anyone fascinating?"

Etta smiled thoughtfully.

"I don't want anyone — for the moment anyhow. I'm just interested in my job."

"*Ah*! I'm glad you said 'for the moment', darling. We can't allow that so-and-so to push romance out of your life."

Suddenly Etta said,

"D'you know, I'd like to find a man like Mark Trender, if there could ever be another like him. I think he's the nicest person I've ever met. But his sort don't grow on trees."

Marian grinned at her friend.

"Careful, darling, don't go and fall for a married man."

"You must be joking. I said a man *like* him, not actually Mr. Trender. He's in love with his wife anyhow — in spite of all their rows and he wouldn't look at me if he wasn't. And if he did I'd soon lose my job so it's not on."

Marian laughed and said, "I was only joking but I'd kind of like you to have a new boy-friend."

"Darling, don't be obstinate. I don't *want* one. Oh, I've had a chance already. There is a man named Chalmers in the same office as Mark. He dines with us quite often. He's good-looking, unattached and drives a super Mercedes. Every time he comes to Green Alders he strolls into the kitchen to have a chat with me."

"Any chance of you being taken out in the Mercedes?" asked Marian hopefully. She longed for Etta to lay the ghost of Rod Stone for good and all.

But Etta's soft golden-green eyes only smiled indulgently at her friend.

"No. I've been invited, but I think it'd be a mistake

for me to go out with any of my employer's friends. Anyhow — I'm right off romance." And she thought suddenly, bitterly, of a verse that a great poet had written about his lost love:

When the feast is finished and the lamps expire
Then falls thy shadow and the night is thine.

She understood that poem only too well. Sometimes Rod's shadow crept back to disturb her.

But soon, very soon, she would banish it, and it would never come back.

5

Flair's father died suddenly in Rome of a coronary, not long after Etta had settled down at Green Alders.

The news, which came by telephone, heralded one of Flair's 'scenes'. She was genuinely fond of her charming and generous Italian father and they had actually arranged for him to come over and spend a week at Green Alders at the end of the summer.

Just before Etta's arrival and Flair's accident, Flair and Mark had been on a brief holiday in Flair's old home. Her father had seemed so well then. A man of many interests, he led a gay full life in Roman society. But, as Mark more than Flair appreciated, his nature was similar to the one he had bequeathed to his beautiful daughter — mercurial, passionate, self-absorbed, and far too self-indulgent. He was nearing sixty and had looked too fondly on the food and wine which had made his dinner parties famous, and his beautiful women friends a scandal.

To Mark, therefore, the sudden end was not altogether unexpected. But Flair was shocked and hysterical.

When they first received the news Etta stayed with Flair until the early hours of the morning, trying to calm her. Mark, his eyes red-rimmed with fatigue had given up making any effort at being the comforter. She ignored him. To Etta's mind, although she might sincerely have

loved her father, Flair seemed to be enjoying her grief and making a melodrama of it.

"Now I am motherless and fatherless and I have nobody but Mark," she kept sobbing, "Oh, Henry, Henry, I am so miserable, nobody knows how I suffer!"

All of which Etta took with a grain of salt while she laid handkerchiefs soaked in eau-de-cologne on Flair's forehead, and wiped away the easy tears.

The next morning the Trenders flew to Rome. Etta was left in charge of Green Alders. When Mark said goodbye he shook hands with Etta.

"You've been with us long enough for me to feel absolute trust in you. Take care of things till we get back. It will be after the funeral of course — probably in a week's time."

She felt sorry for him. Life with Flair must be so fatiguing and they were going through a difficult patch in the office just now. He had hinted at this. It was not an easy time for him to get away. She was less sorry for Flair, despite all the tears. What a little actress she was! When her turn came to say goodbye to Etta she looked the part. She had been busy — very busy — choosing the right mourning outfit. A little black dress, a little black hat on the back of the golden head, and a little black veil. Italian women always wore veils at a time like this, she told Etta in a mournful voice.

"You've got our address and phone number if you want us, haven't you Henry?"

"Yes. But I'm sure I won't need to worry you, Mrs. Trender, everything will be looked after."

"Just one thing," added Flair, "Do you mind phoning Sir Anthony for me. You'll find his number in my book. Just explain about my poor darling father's *tragic* death and tell him I'll get in touch with him when I get back."

Etta smiled a trifle grimly. How typical of Flair that

even in the midst of her sorrow and upheaval she could still think of her so-called 'boy-friend'.

Then they were gone.

They were away for a week during which time Mark telephoned once or twice to see if Etta wanted anything.

He talked to her the day after the burial of the Signore. Like all Continental funerals he told her it had been a sombre long-drawn-out affair with ornate gilded hearse and four black plumed horses to draw it instead of the usual car. This to commemorate the fact that Flair's father had been a famous race-horse owner, and half the Italian racing-world were at the religious service. Flair had borne up quite well, Mark said. The Signore's secretary who was a very efficient man, was now going to take over and attend to the sale of the villa and the business side. The lawyers would do the rest.

"There's some trouble about my father-in-law's will," Mark continued, "but there will certainly be a lot of lovely furniture, valuable paintings and books to be sent to England in due course. Not that I know what we are going to with so much additional stuff at Green Alders," he added with a sigh.

When Etta politely asked if she should say a few words to Mrs. Trender, Mark's answer was brief but revealing, "She isn't in. She's met up with a lot of the friends of her girlhood, and had a dozen invitations, so I told her it was good for her to get out and enjoy herself, and not mope around the villa."

Etta could see more trouble ahead. Her fears were justified. Once Flair was back at Green Alders, she was no longer the tragedy-queen weeping for her father. She was a sulky thwarted child. It wasn't long before she poured out her grievances to Etta.

"Really, Henry, one can't trust any man, even one's father, I don't know *what* my poor darling mother would have said! It's too ghastly. And I never guessed, although

Mark said *he* did, that there was some girl living in Rome who'd got hold of Papa and he's left a lot of his money to her. Isn't it disgraceful?"

Etta looked doubtfully into Flair's brilliant angry eyes.

"But wasn't he very well off? I mean isn't there plenty for you?"

"No. Actually my father lived right up beyond his means and that I always dreaded. He was so extravagant."

Etta concealed a little smile. It was strange how extravagant people thought everybody else spendthrifts except themselves. Anyhow, it appeared that there was nothing like as much money coming into Flair's pocket as she had hoped for. The girl-friend was also to be allowed to choose some of the paintings which were the most valuable assets. Perhaps, Etta reflected, the Signore had not received as much love and attention from his beautiful daughter as he had wanted and therefore the other woman had supplied it.

"I suppose I could sue, but Mark says I wouldn't get away with it and it would be all too difficult and expensive, being in Italy and everything," Flair grumbled. "And we'd have to have international lawyers and what-not, so I'll be content with what I get. It's plenty I'm told. It may not even be worth while shipping all he's left me back here, especially as we've not much room. We could sell a lot in Rome or something. Mark must see to it." Then Flair added, "It's a pity we haven't got a really big gorgeous house like Tony's ancestral home."

That to Etta sounded ominous, but she made no comment, and shortly after this Flair's attention was distracted from her woes by a telephone call from one of her friends, after which she rushed back to the kitchen to announce that she wanted 'Henry' to arrange a lunch party on Sunday for eight.

"Okay by me," said Etta briefly, and noticed with some

cynicism that the time for mourning had passed. Flair was back in the swim — no more sombre black or weeping.

What did she mean about Tony's ancestral home? Those words continued to trouble Etta — on Mark's account.

Regularly every evening now, Mark strolled into the kitchen to say hullo to Etta and ask if all was well with her. She enjoyed his visits, looked forward to them, and appreciated his concern for her. Sometimes when Flair was out he would sit on the edge of the table, smoke a cigarette, and discuss a great many things with her.

During one of these visits, he said: "I realised when I was in Rome what a difference you've made to our lives. Everything runs so smoothly — it's marvellous. We are both grateful, Etta."

"Thank you," she said and flushed.

He looked around, appreciating the sight of tonight's well-organised dinner. He enjoyed Etta's company. He found her a soothing personality and he was not unmindful of her attractions as a woman. She was intriguing because of the way she could swing from cool, businesslike housekeeper to charming, cultured companion. Sometimes it struck him as incredible that she was not really much older than Flair. His maddening, irresponsible wife seemed a child in comparison.

The burden of Flair's hopeless temperament had begun to wear Mark down, but since Etta came to Green Alders, it seemed to him almost that she was sharing that load. She seemed to understand Flair and to have a good effect on her in the difficult moments when she acted like a crazy mixed-up kid.

Mark thought a lot about the way his marriage was deteriorating. There were times when Flair's behaviour affected him and his nerves until he found it difficult to concentrate on his job. Times when she insisted on one late night after another, and he was so tired he found it difficult to get up and catch his early commuters' train.

Yet she could be so entrancing when she wanted to. He could still hardly resist her when she curled up in his arms, dissolved into tears — her golden hair falling across her face — and begged him to go on loving her and to forgive her 'for being naughty'.

"You know I love you," she would say on such occasions, "Oh, I really *do* love my Markie! He's the greatest!"

Then, hungry for love, still wanting to believe that she was the marvellous girl he had married, he would kiss her upturned mouth and try to forget all the crazy selfish things she had done — and the detestable young men she brought to the house — especially Tony Durrance. But soon the misery would begin all over again and Mark was forced to recognise the folly of burying his head in the sand.

One night when he came home and found Flair out, he perched like a schoolboy on a high stool in Etta's kitchen. He liked talking to her. She seemed genuinely interested in the things he liked — antiques, first-editions, good paintings, and world affairs. Any discussion about politics, finance, or the country, bored Flair to tears. But Etta seemed to read quite serious books — listened to talks on her television, or radio, and found the shattering events in modern Europe absorbing. Inevitably this evening conversation turned to Flair.

"My wife and I are alone for dinner tonight, aren't we?" he asked Etta.

She hesitated, lifted a saucepan lid and began to stir a special lobster soup she was making. Flair didn't like soup, but Mark did and Etta felt a curious pleasure in making it — just for him. Nobody else in this house did much especially for Mark.

At length she answered his question.

"I'm not sure. Mrs. Trender went out on the river after

tea — with Sir Anthony. He may stay on for food — she warned me. I've catered for it."

Mark's thin face showed neither surprise nor concern.

"Okay," he said briefly. But Etta knew by the sudden hardening of his lips that he was not pleased.

She turned to the view of the rhododendron bushes visible from the big wide kitchen window. The huge round sugar-pink blossoms were exotic and beautiful in the golden light which had replaced the rain. Perhaps thought Etta, Mark was wondering (as she did) what sort of fun Flair could find on the river in the rain!

"I've never asked you anything much about yourself," Mark suddenly said. "Do tell me more."

"I'm a bit busy, Mr. Trender," she said, her colour rising. She could not help seeing or being pleased by the obvious interest in his eyes.

He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Look — it's only half past six. If I know Flair she won't be back just yet, so do leave the kitchen sink and come into the drawing room with me. Let's both enjoy our sherries in peace. There's nothing here to burn, is there?" he went on with his quick engaging smile.

It was against Etta's principles, but she decided there could be little harm in her drinking a sherry 'in peace' with Mark. Certainly Flair wouldn't mind. She seemed indifferent to anything her husband did. So for the next half-hour, the two of them sat together in the lovely Chinese room facing the river, and learned more about each other.

Mark heard the story of Etta's start in life. First of her difficult girlhood after she lost her mother. He appreciated her sensibility and felt that the loss and her father's re-marriage, must have blunted the edge of her youthful happiness when she was at school. But she spoke about it philosophically.

"It did hit me, but I soon learned one darn-well has

to stand on one's own feet," she said, "sort-of face up to things. And it's nice for me to know Daddy has a companion — a wife again. I don't at all resent Sheila."

"And what about the boy-friends? Every girl has a boy-friend these days, surely?" murmured Mark, "I was only asking Flair the other day if she thought you were what the Victorians call bespoken."

"I was engaged," she said, "but it didn't come off."

"I'm sorry," Mark said gently.

"So was I at the time — very — but I think I'm getting over it." She spoke rather too brightly. He could well believe that this girl had deep feelings. "He found someone he liked better, you see. She was most attractive and he was very attractive," she added, and stared suddenly at the floor.

"So are you if you don't mind me saying so," was his unexpected comment. She flushed again.

"I don't mind at all. It's very flattering."

Now they smiled at each other and were no longer strangers. They were friends, exchanging confidences.

Later Mark gave Etta a few facts about his own boyhood.

"When I was at Oxford," he said, "I had all kinds of ideas. I was very keen on debates. I even turned my hand to writing. Then I suddenly went fresh-air mad and became hooked on rowing — sports generally. My uncle wanted me to go into Parliament which wasn't at all my line, and what with this and that, I became a bit mixed up."

"So, you finally decided on the City?"

Mark smiled, warming to the interest in Etta's beautiful eyes.

"That's right, and I've really enjoyed stockbroking. It can be fascinating. But I assure you I'm still keen on the river. That's perhaps why I've chosen to live down here. For a long time after I left university I used to do a lot

of rowing, but I don't seem to have much time or energy for it now. Flair, of course, is only interested in the launch."

Etta noticed that he told her no details about his original meeting with Flair. He was a little like herself, she decided. They both had that reservation which made them seem difficult to know.

Flair seemed to give him little time in which to enjoy his own interests. But whatever was wrong with this marriage, he was loyal to her, and Etta had discovered a quiet strength in him which gave her, personally, a sense of security and confidence. It puzzled her that he showed weakness only in his dealings with Flair. Why, she wondered. Was he still in love with her?

The more she saw of Mark, the more Etta grew to respect him. Their talk tonight ended when the grandfather clock in the hall reminded them both that it was half-past seven and Flair had still not returned.

Etta saw that Mark was worried. She said, "Mrs. Trender is sure to be home in a moment. I must go and see to the dinner. Besides —" her eyes narrowed with laughter, "the cook oughtn't really to sit chit-chatting to the master of the house. It's just not done!"

He, too, laughed and watched her move away. She had delightful ankles, he thought.

He walked to the windows and stared out at his beloved river. A slim boat moved swiftly through the water — double sculls at practice. Two young men, ardent, vigorous — all that Mark had once been. Their blades were entering the water without a splash — the only sound, that bell-note that used to be such music in Mark's ears. He had won the Diamond Sculls for his college. It seemed a long, long way away from those carefree marvellous days. He had been quite a hero. Now the dedicated rowing man was fast turning, he thought, into a harassed City gentleman who felt continually thwarted.

For the first time he became fully aware of the fact that he had made a terrible mistake in marrying Flair. If there was anything left between them it was only physical attraction. He found that far from satisfactory. He wanted so much more in the way of real companionship.

He began to walk restlessly up and down the room, half-listening for the sound of Flair's return. Why the devil was she always late? She had absolutely no idea of time.

He paused by the mantelpiece and lifted a miniature of his mother — a beautiful woman in a white evening dress; he had inherited her dark Sicilian eyes. Her brown hair curled down to her shoulders; girls used to do their hair that way in the 'forties'.

Hers was a lovely face but a sorrowful one. He liked to look at it but it made him at times unbearably sad. He knew how much she had suffered.

His father, a handsome Brigadier, had come out of the war with a D.S.O. and one arm. Mark's mother had adored him. But he had eyes for other women and finally a once-happy marriage deteriorated into a most unhappy one. Jack Trender was a good soldier but a bad husband. Finally he left his wife and son — then barely ten. A bad time for Angela Trender and for the boy at prep school who had idolised his father. For five years Mark had been pushed between two homes during school holidays. Then his mother died, and the Brigadier remarried and went to live in New Zealand.

At fifteen, Mark found himself living with an uncle — a brother of his mother's — a kindly man. He was well off and Mark had nothing to complain of. But the hurt that he had suffered by the broken home and loss of his parents, left scars on the young boy's sensitive mind. He had vowed that he would never let life be like that if ever *he* married. When the time came, he would love and take care of his wife and let absolutely nothing separate them.

So he had married Flair the beautiful, wild, immature girl from Rome and been her devoted slave — until now. And because of his past he found it impossible to face up to a break-up of his marriage, even today when life with his wife had become so sterile — so unrewarding.

Because of his boyhood and his mother's terrible grief once her husband deserted her for another woman, Mark could not easily break down his resolve never to desert his own wife.

But tonight as he waited for Flair to come home, he thought about that girl in the kitchen and *her* sorrows — her broken engagement — her present dull existence. The man she had loved must have been a damned fool. What a chance he had thrown away! Etta was so worth while.

What chances we all throw away, Mark reflected with bitterness, and what a gamble marriage could be, whether performed in St. George's, Hanover Square, with all the conventional trappings, or one of those brief, soulless affairs in a Registrar's Office. Either one could turn out badly.

Came the sound of a front door slamming and of high-pitched voices — one of which was certainly Flair's.

Mark had hardly got himself on to his feet before the peace of the lovely drawing room was completely shattered by the entrance of four people. First Flair, whose broken arm was no longer in a sling, and who looked ravishingly pretty, wearing a white trouser-suit with a long jacket, the neck open to show a dark blue scarf. There was a small white yachting cap on the side of her head. Her long hair was wind-blown. She pulled the cap off and grinned at Mark rather stupidly, her enchanting face flushed. Tony Durrance followed her. The other two people were strangers to Mark — a tall good-looking, fair-haired man and an attractive, red-haired girl of Flair's age who also wore a trouser-suit. But she looked pinched and cold and

had a fringed shawl wrapped about her. She eyed Mark with quick appreciation.

"Oh, hullo — you must be Mark. We've heard so much about you. I'm Claudia." She came toward him holding out a hand. The red-head was a beautiful girl, Mark thought, and certainly not shy. He shook hands with her, but Tony Durrance only muttered 'Hullo', then announced that he must 'go and tidy'. As he knew the geography of the house, he added, he'd take his friend with him. Who 'the friend' was Mark still hadn't the slightest idea, but the two men disappeared. The girl called Claudia went on chattering to Mark — telling him how cold it was on the river and how idiotic they'd all been, wearing summer clothes and pretending it was warm enough. She was thankful her husband had made her bring her shawl, she said. She was sure Flair must be perished. It was so lovely and cosy in the house. She would soon thaw.

"We'll light the log fire. I don't care if it *is* June, I like my fire," said Flair, "and Mark — I want a drinkie, and so does everybody else, darling." She tugged at Mark's arm and fluttered her long lashes at him.

He made no answer but his heart sank. Another drink party — and all these strangers — so ended his hopes of a quiet evening with Flair (but what a fool he was to think that any evening with Flair could be quiet!)

"Where's Marie-Claire?" Flair demanded, "She ought to have brought in the drinks by now. She really is a dead loss. Let's call Henry."

"Etta is busy cooking and Marie-Claire will be here any moment. I don't think she can be expected to know exactly when you choose to come home," said Mark, "Dinner's an hour late. We can't keep Etta waiting too long. We ought to go straight in."

Flair pouted and threw her cap at him. "Now don't be an old woman, Mark."

"Let Etta know you're back if you haven't already done so," he said more coldly.

She giggled, and put an arm around the other girl whose surname Mark had still not been told.

"My husband is so thoughtful, Claudia darling. Henry's very useful and she cooks like an angel. I do believe Mark has a 'thing' for her."

Mark felt an intense anger and disgust. Almost he told Flair what he thought about her, then shut his mouth. It was useless. Besides he didn't want a row in front of strangers. He said, "I merely think she'll want to know what time you want to eat."

"Oh, don't make difficulties, darling — any old time. She'll manage — she always does. She knows me. Come on, sweetie —" (to the tall girl in the shawl who was listening with amusement in her eyes). They walked out. Mark heard his wife's voice from the hall.

"Henry's our new cook. Her name's really Henrietta. She's divine. My husband dotes on her as you see. He's always thinking of her and worrying in case I overwork her."

Mark felt his face grow hot. It had never entered his head that he 'doted on' Etta. He walked out to the kitchen. His face was grim as he faced the cook.

"I'm terribly sorry, but Mrs. Trender has come back with three guests," he said.

Etta gave her quick bright smile. "Five for dinner, eh? It'll be a bit of a picnic. Just as well I've made a *paella* tonight. I can add some more chicken I've got some pieces in the fridge. Tell Mrs. Trender not to hurry now. I'll dish up at nine-thirty."

Mark turned to Marie-Claire, the Swiss woman, who was standing by the stove. She looked a dreary type, he thought. His eyes were drawn again to Etta. *Never defeated — there she was, carrying on. Not a squeal. Wonderful nature! Never loses her head.* He wondered

secretly what *would* make the cool, reserved Etta lose her head and suddenly his heart missed a beat, remembering Flair's flippant remark, 'My husband dotes on her'. He began to wonder if there was some truth in it.

He turned back to the Swiss and said, "Marie-Claire, please bring us some more ice-cubes and lemon slices, would you?"

He returned to the drawing room. Etta was left to reorganise her dinner.

She heard muffled voices and laughter but did not see the extra guests until they were seated.

Marie-Claire had put a match to the tall candles that burned on the huge dining-table and added finishing touches to the centre-piece — a crystal bowl full of white freesias. Mark had brought them for his wife last night. Two or three times a week he brought her specially chosen flowers.

After giving Marie-Claire her instructions, Etta changed into a fresh overall and carried the first course into the dining room. A sea-fruit cocktail — one of Mark's favourites.

Etta reached the sideboard and laid down her tray. Then she turned and suddenly saw the tall fair man who sat on Flair's right. She felt the blood rush through her veins. Her face went white. Usually she could conceal her feelings, but this was a shock she had never expected. She trembled violently — her gaze rivetted on that familiar handsome, self-satisfied face.

Rodney Stone — *Rod!* But for heaven's sake . . . it couldn't be true . . . His wife, too, of course. That must be Claudia beside Mark. Etta had never met her but she fitted the description given her by a mutual friend who had met her. A spectacular girl with long red hair, slate-grey eyes and a big mouth, not unlike the old photographs of the young Rita Hayworth.

Then Etta's gaze returned to Rodney. His well-remembered blue eyes stared back at her from under their heavy lids. He looked as surprised as she felt. But he didn't smile. He seemed startled into unusual gravity.

Etta felt as though she had been struck by lightning. My knees are wobbling, she thought, I'd better pull myself together or I'll drop every dish before I serve it.

Flair unconsciously saved the day by waving a hand towards Etta and saying in her flippant way, "Let me introduce you all to our Henry — otherwise Henrietta Hughes. She's my very special cookie and we adore her, don't we, Markie?"

The guests politely smiled at Etta. She forced her lips into smiling back at them and began to put the cocktail glasses in place. She then passed round a basket of hot toast.

"*It can't be true*," she kept saying to herself, "*Rod can't be here. I don't believe it.*"

But as her shaking hand handed Rod the toast, he glanced up at her. She had thought — or hoped — that her former feeling for him was dead. Yet why did her heart plunge when he looked up at her in the old remembered way, and she smelt the familiar odour of his hair-lotion, and of cigar-smoke? Rod was very fond of his cheroots.

In this moment of time, Etta was conscious of a hateful resurgence of the emotions that had once broken the ice of her natural reserve and swept her into his arms.

Rod had always been such an exciting lover, such an amusing talented friend, and all the tears she had shed when he left her for that little red-headed thing the other side of the table, seemed to pour yet again into a bottomless pool in which she might drown — drown all over again.

6

Rod had never lacked nerve. He recovered his self-possession once the initial astonishment of seeing Etta and hearing her introduced as Flair's housekeeper was over. He whispered her name as she passed behind him. "*Etta*!"

She ignored this. Pale and trembling she moved round to Sir Anthony's side. She only wished her heart would not pound in such a despicable fashion. She refused to look at Rod and was quite glad when she finally put a cocktail in front of Mark; nice, kind, dependable Mark. He was the only one to notice her agitation. He looked up at her and in an undertone asked if everything was all right.

"Perfectly," she whispered back.

Mark frowned. Flair had too many people here too often. She was working this girl too hard. He must tell her to be more considerate.

Etta hurried back to the kitchen. Marie-Claire was arranging the Spanish *paella* in a big silver entrée dish. It looked enticing, garnished with green parsley and pink shrimps on a bed of glistening rice.

"It smell goot, Miss Hughes, vair *goot*," smiled the Swiss girl.

Etta gave no answering smile. She sat down rather heavily on the nearest stool.

"I've got a ghastly headache," she said. "Please take in the next course for me — just for once, will you?"

Marie-Claire rolled her eyes and pointed to her overall.

"Not clean. Had accident. No goot. Please not me to go in dining room, Miss Hughes."

Etta, thoroughly unnerved, snapped at her. "Oh, don't be silly, Marie-Claire. It won't kill you for once. You can wear my overall."

The Swiss woman now looked stubborn and disapproving, though as a rule she had the greatest admiration for the young English cook.

"Excuse, please, you said I need not go in dining room. I am nervous."

"So am I," muttered Etta, "but never mind, I'll manage."

After all, if Rodney Stone and his wife were friends of the Trenders and liable to come here again, she would have to get used to it — unless, of course, she left Green Alders altogether. But there was no time to start on that train of thought.

She made a tremendous effort to get on top of her feeling. She left Marie-Clare to dish up the vegetables and make sure the cheese soufflé was rising. Etta went back to the dining room to collect the empty sea-fruit glasses, gave them to Marie-Claire, and took the *paella.*

She was calm again. Mark saw with relief that she had more colour. He had been quite alarmed. Rodney Stone saw it, too. He was more shaken than he had imagined by this totally unexpected meeting with his former fiancée. A complete egotist, he was not often mindful of other people's feelings. He had never fully realised how hard his disloyalty had hit Etta. She hadn't made a scene. She had just let him go and wished him luck. And he had found Claudia an irresistible magnet.

But time was when he had been in love with Etta. However her reservations, her very reluctance to yield wholly to

him had, in the long run been irritating. Rod was by nature sensual and demanding. His looks, his charm and his success at the B.B.C. had made him too sure of himself. He had become self-indulgent and greedy. He grew tired of Etta's old-fashioned wish to retain her virginity until marriage. So once Claudia came into his life, Etta faded into the background and he knew he could not marry her.

He remembered his best-man's description of Claudia. 'Electric' he had called her. Nothing quiet about her. The thunder was there as well as the lightning. They fell into each other's arms. They had violent altercations and equally violent reconciliations. There was a wildness in Claudia. She possessed him completely. At the last fence, Rod knew he must have her — and not Etta. Of course he was aware that he behaved disgracefully, especially making his exit only a few days before their wedding.

He had felt badly about it. He didn't want to be cruel to Etta who had been so wonderful to him, and he hated unpopularity. One or two of their friends had dropped him after he had jilted Etta. He had really been upset because she refused to have anything more to do with him. He blamed her friend, Marian Collis. She had been viperish, had torn strips off him. If it hadn't been for her influence he was sure he could have gone on seeing Etta. Even when he was so crazy about Claudia, he missed Etta. She had a quality, a grace, a quiet charm which a man could not easily forget — even after he had broken away.

His gaze drifted now from the astonishing sight of Etta serving the dinner to his wife. They hadn't been married long. So far, the marriage had been a success — in the physical sense, anyhow. The sight of that marvellous red hair spread on the pillow beside his, and her lovely, seductive body, still held him in thrall.

They had an amusing life together. The honeymoon in Bermuda had been a great experience. Almost, but not

quite, he had put Etta out of his mind. It all made him feel vaguely uncomfortable. There had been such heart-break in her eyes when they met for the last time.

Claudia caught her husband's gaze. They grinned at each other. She knew who Etta was, all right. But what did she care? She had taken Rod away from Etta, anyhow, and she was not gifted with conscience.

Rod looked again at the 'housekeeper' — efficient, cool, intriguing. He didn't know what she felt about him now. But for Etta the meal was a long-drawn-out misery. After dinner she left Marie-Claire to switch on the Dishmaster and do the rest of the clearing up, and retired to her own room. She met Mark halfway up the stairs. He smiled at her a little anxiously.

"Sure you're all right, Etta? You looked — well — not too good in the dining room."

She tried to smile back.

"Oh, I'm fine — it was just a migraine — nothing else," was her defiant reply.

"We gave you a lot of extra work and you've been at it all week."

"I like work."

"You're a rare specimen," Mark said, and held out a packet of cigarettes. She calmed down and took one gratefully. It was what she needed. As he lit it for her she could hear the sound of music. Someone was playing the piano. Now she recognised the touch. *Rod!* How dare he? He was playing a song he knew to be her favourite. He was singing it too, in that familiar lilting Andy Williams voice.

Mark saw that she was listening. He, too, kept quiet for a moment. That fellow, Stone, was talented, he thought. He wondered who wrote the words. They were sentimental but quite potent.

Where have you gone in this world of pain?
I ache for the touch of your lips again

The night is dark and I am alone
Where have you gone, my love, my own?

At that moment somebody opened the drawing room door. Etta and Mark could now hear Claudia's voice.

"Oh, darling, what gloom! — and if you want to know where *I've* gone — I'm just going, and you can guess where."

A burst of laughter followed this tasteless sally. Mark looked quickly at Etta. She turned away and darted up the stairs.

He went down slowly to join the others.

Up in her room Etta sat on her bed, beating her fists against the sides. No tears, no, she wasn't going to cry. She only felt blind anger against Rod and what he had done to her — and against herself for being so weak as to succumb to the old anguish. As for Claudia, she had debased the feeling in that line — "*Where have you gone, my love, my own?*" Well, she was Rod's wife. Let her do what she liked, and if *that* sort of vulgarism amused him, why care? That was the real man. In the old days she had never really seen the coarse side of him. A tap on her door suddenly was followed by Rod's familiar voice.

"Etta? This is your room, isn't it? The Swiss Miss said so. Etta, are you there? I want you to come down and have some music. Flair sent me up. You're sort of one of the family, aren't you, even though you do the cooking. Don't hide away. Come down and sing to us. We'll try one of our old duets if you like."

This impudence seemed so colossal that Etta sat up and looked at the closed door. She actually laughed aloud.

"You — oh — *you* — " she began furiously but he broke in.

"Don't be cross, please. I know I've been a bastard to you and I'm not surprised if you don't want to speak to

me, but can't we be a little more civilised? Can't we get together again and become friends?"

"No, we can't," Etta said harshly, as she clutched the side of her bed with both hands again and dug her teeth into her lower lip.

"Do you want me to go away?"

"Yes."

"Not very flattering." She heard him laugh. She used to like his slight, boyish laughter and to laugh with him. At this moment she was glad he couldn't even see her. Her face felt hot and flushed. Her hands were shaking.

"Can't we bury the past?" he insisted.

"You can bury anything you want. I just don't want to see or talk to you again."

"Darling, it's not like you to be so hard."

Hard, she thought, no — I never was — I was much too soft, only too careful of my virginity. But I've learned it doesn't pay for a woman to be that way and that it's the light ones — light, yet hard at the core and greedy like Flair, and Claudia — who can keep their hold on men like Rod.

"Do you hate me now?" The charming, pleasant voice went on outside her door. Oh, she knew him and she was beginning to know him even better now. He didn't like being rejected. He was trying to 'save face' by making light of their affair.

"Let's bury the past," he said again.

"Do please go back to your wife," she said, setting her teeth, "Incidentally I admire your taste. She's quite an eyeful, isn't she?"

"It's not like you to be sarcastic."

She gave a high-pitched laugh. "I'm not at all the old Etta, and I don't wish to resuscitate the past or to be friends with you."

"I'm sorry," he said in a hurt voice.

She stared at the closed door with bewildered eyes.

She did not want to go on arguing. She hated post-mortems. But the old damnable attraction that had once made him her life as well as her love lingered on. The very fact that she seemed still to be vulnerable infuriated her. She said, "Look, Rod, I'm here as a cook-housekeeper and that's what I wish to remain. You and I can have nothing to say to each other. You're married. Oh, believe me, I hope you're happy," she added, her voice deliberately cool and light.

"*Do you?*" He spoke softly and she wanted to hit him. He was so frightfully conceited — so well-aware that his good looks, his charm, his audacity, were things most girls found hard to resist.

Suddenly she marched to the door and opened it. There he stood, arms crossed and one of his famous cheroots between his lips. The familiar sight suddenly sickened her. His physical appeal was just losing its hold on her. She hated the way he stood there, grinning, so cocksure of himself.

"For heaven's sake, go on down — join the others and leave me alone," she said, "Why are you wasting your time — or mine? I keep telling you I don't want to be friends with you any more. Must I keep repeating it? Please respect my wishes."

"You're being very pompous, darling."

"And stop calling me 'darling'."

"We *are* on our high horse!"

'How unspeakable can you be?"

"I thought you'd be pleased I still want you as a friend."

"Well, I'm *not*, and I don't want you as — as *anything*," she said angrily, and pushed a strand of hair back from her eyes.

Rodney Stone looked at the dark silky hair. She had tied it back with a bow, but he remembered it more vividly worn loose, curling down to her shoulders. He still thought her quite attractive. Thinner than she used to be,

poor girl, *too* thin. She didn't look awfully well. He supposed she had been badly shaken because he backed out of their marriage. He was sorry in so many ways for so many things, but he had *had* to have Claudia

Etta was sweet, but just a little too — *too what*? He couldn't really put a name to it. Too idealistic and full of high principles — well — he didn't agree with them. He had wanted her madly and she had fobbed him off. This attitude had ended by freezing him. There was also a too-gentle quality in Etta — something that had begun to make him feel she was really too good for him. Finally this became an irritant. It was her fault they'd ended up by parting. But he and Claudia were well-matched. He was not really a good person — neither was she. They understood each other and they burned up together.

Etta had always been a queer mixture, capable, efficient, intelligent on one hand — yet in her emotional life, inexperienced and far too introverted. Of course things might have turned out fine once they were married but he had begun to doubt that even while he was making preparations for their marriage. Once Claudia, the bombshell, burst in on him, Etta had to lose. That was inevitable.

Now that Claudia was his wife, Rod had no particular designs upon Etta. But he liked to be on good terms with everybody. He didn't want Etta to hate him and her obvious distaste for him now amused and interested him.

He put out a hand and caught one of hers. "I'm glad you opened the door. One can't really carry on a conversation through wood panels." His gaze travelled up and down the slim figure in the white overall. "You're not really as starchy as that kitchen uniform. I know it. I don't somehow think you were *ever* as frigid as you pretended to be when I used to get steamed up. But let's not talk about that."

She dragged her fingers away, her cheeks scarlet. "No,

let's not. What I felt about you is dead and buried, and honestly I don't know why you want to open up the grave."

He caught back her hand and kissed it lightly, gracefully. "I like ghosts who look like you, darling. But don't let's talk about ghosts and graves. Just tell me if all's well with you — *and* if you really like cooking meals for the Trenders. Flair seems a bit of a champagne-dolly. *He's* okay but a bit difficult I'd say. Is this domestic job *really* your métier? What about your music? All those evenings with my guitar and songs?"

"I have my days off and I still like music, but I'm in a job," she said coldly, drawn against her will into further discussion with him. He really was hard to get rid of. He seemed so very anxious to be friendly. Maybe she ought to adopt a less serious tone and let him think she was perfectly happy without him.

"Well, are you happy?" he asked the question now.

"Perfectly." She looked straight at him, chin up.

"Are you a permanency here?"

"If they want me to continue, I shall stay. I quite enjoy the place. I think I'm a bit of a help to Flair — and Mark — who incidentally is far from being difficult. He's a very interesting person. I believe he's terribly well thought of in the City and he's quite a well-known sportsman. He won the Diamond Sculls for his college. He's wonderful to work for."

Rod grimaced, shrugged and took the cheroot from his lips and eyed the end reflectively. "Quite a chap. He doesn't shine in public."

Etta managed a dry laugh. "Some men don't put all the goods in the shop window."

"My, *my*!" said Rod and laughed. "Queer how small the world is. Never expected to come down here and find my ex-girl-friend handing out the dinner. Of course Claudia is an old friend of Flair's. Well, well! I reckon

we may come down to Green Alders again, so if we do, please Etta, don't put up a lot of barbed wire like you've done tonight. Life's too short."

Sometimes it can be too long, she thought. *That day on which we should have been married seemed an eternity to me — quite hellish. With you it was just goodbye to someone you didn't really love. It was different for me.*

Rod spoke again in quite a humble voice. "Etta dear, I know I behaved abominably. I did write and ask you to forgive me. You didn't answer."

"I had nothing to say."

"Well, say you forgive me now. Let's make a bargain — whenever we meet, we'll behave as though we were never engaged and are just old friends."

Her green-gold eyes flashed at him.

"How easy it sounds! You amaze me!"

"You were always marvellous," he went on, "and in my way I loved you. I was just not quite the heroic, self-effacing character you wanted, and I wanted you too badly."

That was clever, she thought bitterly. Emotion was fast draining out of her. He wanted to make her feel responsible. Perhaps he was right. He had loved her *in his way*, and it hadn't been *her* way. Perhaps she was over-dramatising the whole affair. She might do better to treat him with the contempt he deserved — and appear completely indifferent.

"Okay — no more fighting," she said briefly, "Let's drop the whole thing. I'm sure you and Claudia will be very happy."

"That's my girl," he said admiringly, and put a brotherly arm around her and kissed her hand again. She recoiled. He felt it, but made no comment.

"I'd better get back to the party," he said. "Can't you shed that overall thing and join us?"

"I'm afraid I don't join my employers' parties. They're

very nice to me and quite friendly, but I *am* the housekeeper."

"Fantastic!" he said and laughed and left her.

She went back into her room and shut the door. She felt cold and shaken. *I hope it's more than a long time before he comes down to Green Alders again, I don't want to see him or his wife. I just don't.*

Then she remembered what Rod had said about Mark. 'Difficult', he had called him. Nothing could be further from the truth. Mark was quiet — reticent. He just wasn't an extrovert — a show-off like Rod and his chums. She really had misjudged his character when she had fallen so desperately for Rod.

Etta felt suddenly better. She marched into her bathroom and turned on the hot water. She even began to feel light-hearted — as eager for life as the old Etta used to be.

But it was a long time before her nerves stopped jangling and she could close her eyes and sleep.

In the morning she went to Flair's bedroom, having been informed by Mrs. Box that 'Madame' was awake and wanted to see her. It was early for Flair — only ten o'clock. After most of her parties she rarely showed signs of life before eleven or even later. Mark, of course, had long since gone to the City. Etta wrinkled her nose as she opened the bedroom door. There was a strong odour of perfume and cigarette-smoke. The curtains were still drawn, but she could see Flair's huddled body and the long fair hair tumbled over the sheet. The lovely little face was half buried in the pillow.

Etta had reached a stage these days when she dared to take a strong line with 'Madame', especially after parties. It disgusted her that the young girl slept with all the windows shut. The atmosphere was thick; the room in hopeless disorder. The long dressing-table with its huge mirror looked as Etta often described it for Marian, like a

display in a perfumier's shop that had just been rifled. Complete chaos. Flair never bothered to put back lids on boxes, or tops on bottles. Powder was spilled. Half-used tissues flung down at random. Clothes, tights, lingerie — all scattered over the floor.

She was bone-lazy. Mark must have slept in that double bed, thought Etta, and breathed this unhealthy air against his will. Such a thought somehow troubled her.

She pulled the curtain-cords, let a flood of sunshine into the room and opened the windows wide. The pure fresh morning breeze poured in. There was a scream from the bed.

"Henry! you *so-and-so*. I can't take that light. Draw those curtains again. I *hate* you."

"You must have air. Sack me if you want to," said Etta without remorse.

With a groan, Flair bounded into a sitting position and shook back her hair. The usually exquisite skin looked greasy and blotched in the morning light. Her eyes were half-closed. The mascara had run. She grimaced at Etta, "I hate you," she repeated, "I could have done with more sleep. I only rang to ask for a cup of tea. I didn't mean to wake right up and start domestic discussions with you, Henry."

"Then perhaps you'd better remember that you've got a friend coming to ride with you in half an hour's time."

Flair flung herself back on the pillow and dug her fists into her eyes.

"Blast, *blast*! You mean my date with Tony? You're so good at remembering. But I'm not going to ride this morning. My head would drop off if I did. I feel awful."

Etta gave her a swift accusing glance. "Was the party worth it?"

Flair giggled. The thing in Flair's favour, thought Etta, and the one which probably made Mark tolerant of her failings, was the lack of real malice. She had a certain

endearing childishness. It irritated Etta at times, but she realised how completely men fell for it, coupled with her physical attractions.

Later, after drinking the China tea with lemon which Etta made for her, Flair retired to her bathroom to sluice her face with cold water, after which she felt better. Some of her natural beauty returned. But how long would it last, Etta wondered. Only until the next night of champagne and so much else in her life that would finally lead to her deterioration. She would be fat and blowsy when she was older — if she ever got old, Etta reflected. Flair burned the candle at both ends far too fiercely. Soon she was able to have a discussion with her housekeeper. She looked with something like envy at Etta's cool neat figure in the overall, and at the serene attractive face.

"I don't know how you can bear to get up so early, then do all that cooking and still look so good, Henry," she sighed. "Please ring Tony for me now, darling, and tell him I'm off colour and won't be riding. Tell him he can call me up later today."

Etta did this, then returned to Flair with her pad and biro.

"What do you want for eats today?"

"There's nobody for lunch, is there?" asked Flair, yawning. She lit a cigarette which she soon extinguished because she said it tasted nasty.

"Not that I know."

"Good, we'll make it a diet day. You can order what you like for tonight. I suppose I'll have to stay in. I did want to go to the Bolton's buffet supper, but Mark said he's too tired to take me. He's becoming such a wet-blanket."

Etta looked at her note-book. She was fast being used as a social secretary as well as a cook, she reflected. Life was never dull in this job. But she could not help disliking Flair's total disregard for her husband's feelings.

"I think Mr. Trender's just very tired at the moment,"

she said. "Since the warm weather started, they say it's been grim in the City — " A trill of laughter from Flair interrupted Etta.

"Now, darling Henry, don't start a lecture. You *are* Mark's champion these days, *aren't* you?"

Etta actually felt the blood rising to her cheeks but answered curtly, "Just realistic."

"You think having fun at night is too much for my noble husband?"

"Yes, when he's been up in the office all day. No hard-worked man can take parties every night."

"But I work as hard as Mark," pouted Flair. "At having fun, I work like crazy. And Markie's turning into such a gloomy old bore."

"I wouldn't call him that."

"You don't have to live with him. He's become so serious. He wasn't when we first married, though he's never been as amusing as Tony and some of my other boy-friends."

Etta remained silent. She had no intention of discussing Mark any further with his wife. But she wanted to warn this pretty silly creature not to push her luck too far. She had a wonderful husband if only she'd realise it. She was mad to risk losing him. Was she really idiotic enough to suppose she would be better off with a man like Tony Durrance? Was *that* at the back of her mind? Would she enjoy being Lady Durrance, and living in the fast moving jet-set with a young man who was as shallow and unreliable as herself?

At this precise moment it struck Etta that Flair was right. She, Etta, was in a way Mark's champion. She admired him more than any man she knew. She had never met one she thought more admirable and that included Rod. Etta worked for them both in this household. But it did strike her at times that Mark was, in fact, far more *her* type than Flair's.

While she sat there in Flair's bedroom listening to her chatter, she realised that there was one big thing in Flair's favour. She was not jealous. She obviously did not misconstrue Etta's regard for Mark. It even seemed to amuse her.

Suddenly Flair startled her by bringing Rod's name into their discussion.

"What did you think of Rod — that smashing boy who came to dinner last night. He's done well at the B.B.C. and he's a super guitarist; great on the piano, too. Perhaps you heard him playing?"

Etta's face flushed. She answered without looking at Flair.

"Yes, I did."

"His wife, Claudia, has been a friend of mine for ages. He's rather attractive, don't you think, Henry?"

Etta murmured an inaudible reply.

"Claudia's mad about him. I must say I find him dishy."

"He is not my type," Etta said suddenly, defiantly. And knew how completely true that statement was. He was not her type. She had been completely mistaken in him.

"But my husband is. You're welcome, darling," said Flair, with laughter.

"You're joking," said Etta and now her voice was icy.

"Claudia says he was engaged to another girl before she met him. Then he ditched her," Flair added, walking toward the door, humming as she went.

This was a bit too much for Etta. Scarlet, she rose to her feet.

"Sorry, Mrs. Trender, I must get back to my kitchen."

Flair called to her, "I hope my dear husband comes home in a good mood. I want him to let me ask Rod and Claudia down to spend a weekend with us. I adore them."

Etta gave an inaudible answer and left the room. She had a frantic wish to escape from this house and all the occupants. If Rod was going to spend many weekends

here with his wife and she had to see a lot of him, and finally suffer the humiliation of being forced into telling her employers that it was he who had jilted her, she couldn't take it.

She decided to phone Marian that night and tell her that she must leave Green Alders.

But she changed her mind.

Mark came back from the City earlier than usual, looking ill and complaining of a bad headache. Flair was out. Etta took his temperature. It was a hundred-and-two. Etta now firmly took charge, and without listening to Mark's protests, persuaded him to go to bed in his dressing-room. She was sure he had 'flu. He was feverish and had a very sore throat. But when an hour later he seemed worse, she asked him to give her the local doctor's telephone number, and sent for him.

Flair had gone to town with friends but would be back for the evening meal.

The doctor confirmed Etta's diagnosis. Mark had 'flu, and badly. It meant bed and antibiotics for him for the next few days.

Mark, who had been feeling wretched all day, finally lay in his cool bed and gratefully watched Etta close the shutters to darken the room and place a jug of iced orange by his bedside.

"You really are an angel," he whispered.

"Just hurry up and get better."

"Well, you weren't dragged down here to be a nurse as well as a cook," he said with a weak laugh, and shut his eyes. The pain blinded him.

"I don't mind looking after you, Mr. Trender."

"Bless you. And try to keep my wife out of this room, won't you? I don't want her to catch whatever bug I've got."

Etta promised, but wondered whether Flair would of her own free will have risked infection. She would certainly

not want to nurse her husband. Etta loked at him. He was flushed with fever but drowsy now. The tablets the doctor had left were taking effect.

"I'm just going to drive down to the chemist to get those antibiotics," she said, "I'll tell Marie-Claire to answer the phone and make sure you are not disturbed."

Mark opened one eye and grinned at her. "Sorry to be a nuisance. Don't you catch this damned 'flu."

"I don't think about such things," said Etta briefly and departed.

So, after all, she did not ring Marian that night and say she was handing in her notice. However awkward or disagreeable it might be for her to have to see a lot of Rod, she could cope. It would be easier from now on, as she was so well aware that her feelings had completely changed.

7

Mark recovered quickly. During the three days that he was laid up, Etta organised her work so that she could cook lunch and dinner for Flair, and make special dishes to tempt the invalid once his temperature came down, and he began to want food.

Mark had never been better looked after in his life. He realised how fortunate he was. Against his will this attractive 'nurse' made him take more rest and sleep than he otherwise would have done, and he was sure his speedy recovery was due to her. He marvelled that Etta was still so young yet, in many ways, so mature. She obviously had a strong maternal streak. She seemed to like nothing better than looking after people.

Flair, as anticipated, kept well away from infection — chatted to her husband outside the door, blew kisses through the keyhole, and sent him champagne and flowers by Etta.

"Those roses were arranged by *me* — aren't they *gorgeous*, darling?" she called out to Mark after making one of these gestures. She had a perpetual desire to be praised even by Mark.

He called back, "Gorgeous, darling, and all my thanks. Sorry I've been such a nuisance."

Of course she assured him that he was no bother at all,

then when he asked her what she was doing, she talked about nothing but herself for the next ten minutes. It didn't seem to him that she missed him much. She had given one dinner party at home, and had been out a lot, and when she told him that she was off to a big party in Oxford the next day, and that some friends were putting her up for the night, Mark felt curiously indifferent. He had, in fact, been just about to announce that he was no longer infectious, and that the doctor had said he could go downstairs tomorrow. He felt a bit weak when he was up. The antibiotics, taken daily, didn't help. But he wanted to get back to work — that was definite. And if he hoped for a sweet reconciliation with his wife — he soon found he hoped in vain.

She kept chatting about Tony's chauffeur who would be driving them to Oxford, in the Rolls, and how they were taking another couple with them (Mark didn't think he had ever met them). He was forced to reflect that it was always *Tony* with Flair, these days. He used not to be jealous. He was not a suspicious man, but he began to feel a little disturbed that Flair spent quite so much time in Tony's company.

She explained that the Oxford party was a 'Twenty-First' and going to be a very late one. Dancing till dawn. The father of the birthday girl was a millionaire. It would be a super show. She didn't want to miss any of it, and she didn't want to have to drive back so late, so her hostess had offered to put her up.

"You don't mind, do you, darling?" she called out to Mark.

He looked at the closed door between them. "No, of course not, if it's what you want to do, darling."

"Oh, you are sweet!" she said without sincerity, then left because she had a date in Marlow for a hair-do. "Henry will look after you I'm sure," were her parting words.

Henry! Somehow the nickname she had given their young housekeeper irritated Mark. Etta was not masculine enough to deserve it. For all her capabilities she was very feminine.

He only discovered through a stray word dropped by Marie-Claire that tomorrow should have been Etta's day off, but that as Madame was going away, Miss Hughes had cancelled her proposed trip to town.

Mark was so annoyed at Flair's lack of consideration for the girl who did so much for them all that he rang the bell and asked to speak to his wife as soon as she came home.

When he tackled her about Etta, Flair had a swift gay reply, "Oh, she doesn't mind a bit. She's agreed to take Friday off instead."

"It mightn't suit her — " began Mark, then added, "Now I remember, darling, we've asked the Aston-Wrights to dinner on Friday."

"Oh, I put them off," came Flair's reply, "I didn't think you'd want them as you're not well, and really, sweetie, they're such bores."

Mark who was sitting in a chair in his dressing gown, started to make an angry reply. Flair was going too far. But when he called her name there was no reply and he heard the sound of a car in the drive and knew that she had gone off on one of her innumerable jaunts.

He told himself that he was being made a fool of and much as he had loved Flair he couldn't go on much longer with this laissez-faire attitude. It didn't do her any good and it humiliated him. Besides, what right had she to put his friends off — *his* friends, this time. John Aston-Wright of course was not Flair's type — a plain short man, no glamour about him. But he had been Mark's best friend at Oxford and they had rowed together. Now he was a client, too.

Mark meant to have him here for dinner whether Flair

wanted it or not. He would phone John this morning and tell him that he was quite fit again. He could always pretend that Flair had cancelled the party out of a misplaced consideration. But Flair had queered his pitch.

When Alicia, John's wife, answered the phone, she told him with regret that after Flair made the cancellation, John went up North to see his old widowed mother for a couple of days. They were no longer available.

Gloomily Mark replaced the receiver. He wasn't enjoying his cigarette — the first since the 'flu — and he didn't enjoy his thoughts, either.

He was glad when Etta brought in his lunch. Glad, too, that tomorrow he would be downstairs again and save her further trouble. She wouldn't let Marie-Claire wait on him.

When she came in, he noticed at once that she was not wearing the usual overall. She looked different and very attractive in a lavender linen dress and jacket. He had not realised she was so slender and had such beautiful legs. Sunburn suited her, and he liked the way she had done that silky dark hair today — high on top of her head for once — quite sophisticated. He put aside his worries and grinned at her.

"I say, we look very festive!"

"I'm meeting a friend this afternoon for tea, and I forgot to put on my overall just now," she explained, and added, "I am glad to see you up, Mr. Trender."

"Call me Mark for heaven's sake. This Mr. Trender-business embarrasses me."

"Oh, I oughn't — " she began, but he interrupted,

"Nonsense. I'm Mark to everybody else so why not to you?"

Pink in the face, Etta made a funny little old-fashioned bow, "Thank you, sir."

"And not so much of the 'sir'," he said smiling.

He really did look better today she thought, although

still pale and thinner than usual. He had taken the 'flu rather badly. She was accustomed to seeing the melancholy in those strikingly handsome eyes of his, but when he was as cheerful as he seemed this moment, she thought how full of feeling they were. They had a dark golden, luminous quality.

Flair had once told her that Mark's grandmother was a Sicilian. He had inherited from her those thickly-lashed Sicilian eyes. Romantic in a way, but there was a certain bitter strength in the rest of his lean face.

"Flair's gone, hasn't she?" he asked.

"Yes." Etta made a pretence of arranging the plate and cutlery on his tray. She never felt at ease when he spoke about Flair.

"Open the window a bit, will you, Etta? I refuse to be treated as an invalid any more. For two pins I'd get dressed and go sculling with those chaps I saw on the river the other day."

"Take me with you," she laughed, "although I am sure I'd rock the boat. They look so terribly narrow, and seem to need such fine balance."

"You're right," he nodded and sighed. "Oxford and my days on the river seem one hell of a long time ago."

"You aren't all that old, Mr — Mark."

"I feel it," he smiled.

"Do eat your trout. I've fried it in butter and there are some nice new peas from the garden. Don't let it all grow cold."

He looked into the entrée dish and exclaimed, "Superb! — *truite-meunière* — my favourite, and nobody fries fish better than you do."

She wanted to stay and talk to him but thought it scarcely her duty to do so. As she turned, Mark said, "Don't run away. If you have a second to spare, stay and talk to me while I eat this banquet."

She turned and seated herself. Flair was not due home

until much later today. During the last week Etta had watched, with contempt, the completely selfish way in which the girl had behaved — her unbelievable lack of interest in her husband. She was going out and staying out with her friend Tony more and more. Even in the short two months that Etta had worked at Green Alders, she had noticed the change in Flair. True, there were not many stormy scenes; nor the hysterics she had produced when Etta first came to Green Alders. But somehow she seemed to be more indifferent to Mark. It worried Etta. Not only did it seem that Flair was veering toward a break-up of her marriage (which would in Etta's opinion be the greatest mistake of her life), but she was hurting Mark.

It seemed grim, Etta reflected, that he should be reduced to asking the housekeeper to stay and talk to him.

At his request, she accepted a cigarette and when he opened the half-bottle of champagne she was given a glass.

"A nice thing — the cook imbibing up in the master's bedroom," she joked.

He smiled and raised his glass to her. "Nice for me. Cheers! I feel I've been a prisoner for years instead of days. Much as I like my room, I must say I look forward to getting back to normal."

" 'Flu *can* pull you down. You must ask Dr. Maxon for a tonic. I'm sure you need one before you re-join the commuters."

"You're very nice to be concerned."

"I'm sure your wife must be, too."

I wonder! thought Mark.

And Etta thought, I've just said something that bears no resemblance to the truth. She isn't at all worried about him.

They talked of many things, and found they had much in common. They both enjoyed the break.

Suddenly he said, "I rather value your opinion of people.

What did you think of that couple who came the other night — the Rodney Stones. They're old friends of Flair's. I haven't met them before, myself."

At once the brightness in her eyes vanished. Her lips tightened. She answered quietly, "I — I thought Claudia very spectacular — such wonderful red hair!"

"And Rodney Stone? My wife thinks he's attractive. Of course we don't always see eye to eye about our guests," and now Mark spoke lightly, "but perhaps you girls see certain qualities in men that other men miss."

Etta hesitated to reply. She did not want to talk about Rod. She did not want to lie. Neither could she bring herself to tell Mark that she had so nearly *married* Rodney. It would make things too embarrassing. Quickly she got up and picked up the tray.

"I was really too busy to notice Mr. Stone," she said untruthfully. "Now I must get back to my job. Thanks awfully for the talk and my drink."

"I'll be down in the dining room tomorrow." Mark reminded her.

"Then I'll bring your supper tray up here tonight. If it's fine tomorrow, you and Flair could have meals out on the terrace in the sun. I'm sure you could do with it."

"We'll see. I may feel fit enough to go back to the City," he said. And Etta saw that all his enthusiasm and light-heartedness had gone. He had, of course, momentarily forgotten that Flair was going to a party tomorrow night.

That following evening he walked into his wife's bedroom whilst she was putting the finishing touches to her make-up. They had barely exchanged more than a few words since she came home. She had been resting. He came up behind her and kissed the top of her hair.

"You look gorgeous," he said with less enthusiasm than usual, but smiled at her reflection in the mirror. She was exquisite in her long white crêpe dress, tightly moulded

to her figure, flattering the small perfect breasts. Her hair fell in thick shining waves on either side of her face. As he kissed her, she turned her head and smudged her own lips which she had just outlined with a new shade of pink. She uttered an exclamation.

"Look, what you've made me do!" she said crossly.

"Oh, darling, sorry! Give me a tissue and I'll make it okay again."

"Silly! I can do it myself."

Then as she saw his expression of concern, and remembered that he had been laid up, and that she was not being very nice, going out as soon as he got up, she added, "I hate leaving you tonight, Markie. It's such a shame our dates clashed, and I didn't realise you were so much better when I promised. I can't *not* go at the last minute. Everyone expects me. Can't you make *tomorrow* night your first dinner down? Then we'll celebrate."

He was nettled but decided not to spoil her fun.

"Okay, we'll make it a celebration tomorrow," he said shortly.

Flair looked at herself in the mirror and brushed a second coat of mascara on her upcurled lashes. It was on tonight's fun she was concentrating. It should be super. Tony danced like a dream and there were so few good dancers these days. A pity Mark was such a hopeless partner.

Evenings alone with her husband were growing more and more dull to Flair. And evenings with Tony more and more attractive. They had so much in common. She must have excitement. It was not as exciting to have a husband as a lover.

There were many dangerous thoughts in her egotistic shallow little mind. Frequent visions of herself as the future Lady Durrance. Why oh why, hadn't she met Tony before she fell for Mark. But eager for tonight's entertainment

she returned to living for the moment, which was really the way she liked it. She smiled at her husband.

"Tony'll be here any second, darling. Go and ask Henry to come up, will you? She said she'd re-varnish my nails. She's rather good at manicuring."

Mark stood still a moment. She hadn't so much as asked him how he was feeling. What was the matter with her?

"Call Henry, darling, or I'll be late," she said fretfully. "And be a good Markie and phone Tony. He wants to know what time to fetch me. Tell him, in half an hour."

Now Mark sat down, both hands clenched in his jacket pockets.

"There's a phone by your bed, my dear Flair. Ring him up yourself."

She turned round on the stool and pouted. "Don't be so nasty."

"My dear girl, it's about time you realised that you are the one who is *nasty*, if you want to use that word. And while we're on about Tony Durrance, I'd like you to see less of him. You've often called *me* a bore, well, I think he's unutterably boring, and a scrounger of the first order. He never pays his way or returns my hospitality, and I hate his long hair and trendy suits. He just annoys me."

Flair turned back to her mirror, her cheeks pink with anger, all the good humour gone.

"If you've only come into my bedroom to be unpleasant, you might as well go back to your own room," she said.

He looked bitterly at the beautiful double-bed. "And you seem to have forgotten for some long time that it's *our* bedroom — not yours alone — and that I have some right to expect my wife to be a little more often with her husband."

She turned to him again, "Dear me — the 'flu *has* soured you, Markie. And if you're accusing me of not sleeping with you — please remember I am not your 'Turkish Delight' slave."

He got on to his feet. He had never before felt so angry with her. The day had past when he was going to be so blindly taken by her beauty and charm that he would forgive her anything. He had no intention of losing his own self-respect, as well as his respect for her.

"Anyhow what have you got against Tony?" Flair went on, eyeing him through her lashes.

"I'll ask *you* a question. What's going on between you two? Are you fed up with our marriage? Do you want to end it?"

That frightened her — that and the bitterness in his voice — the sternness of his lips. She knew perfectly well that she would indeed like to be the future Lady Durrance and mistress of Tony's gorgeous stately home. Of course she realised Mark was much too decent and upright for her. Such qualities had made her want him at first. It was fun to make a man like that fall for you. And at the time she met Mark she hadn't been living with her father, and was sick of life on her own without much money.

She had never told a living soul but she had once been involved in one of those famous Roman scandals over a playboy Italian prince, and a suicide after a wild party. Her father had been furious and sent her over to London to live with an aunt and do some work. She had found a job in the 'rag trade' which was how she had met Claudia.

Then Mark had come along. She had been mad about him then — adored his beautiful manners — his gentle side — his sweetness to her. But she was the absolute reverse of the domesticated type and soon found that looking after Mark and Green Alders was not her 'cup of tea'.

But she reflected she was not yet ready to do a moonlight flit with Tony. *He* had a father who was the reverse of permissive, and there wasn't enough money around for Tony *yet*.

She bottled up her feelings, walked to Mark and put her arms around his neck.

"Oh, you are an old silly! Of *course* I don't want Tony instead of you. He's just a good-time boy and I like having good times with him. Up till now you've always said you didn't mind so long as I was happy."

For a moment Mark did not soften. Her perfumed nearness left him strangely cold.

"You used to seem much more fond of me than you are now, my dear Flair. Remember, I've had some pretty ghastly scenes to cope with and tried to excuse you because of your Italian blood — and other reasons. And I've always felt you needed looking after."

"I still do," she said, and brushed her cheek against his.

Automatically his arms went around her. His sober gaze rested for a moment on the curve of her small perfect breasts. In that moment he didn't know whether he despised her or still wanted her.

"It's a good thing I'm not supposed to be infectious still," he snapped, "but you'd better be careful. 'Flu is the devil."

"Don't be horrid. Kiss me. Careful of my hair, lover, but kiss me, and then I'll make up my lips again."

He kissed her roughly, unlike himself — resenting her even while he found her desirable. Like a naughty child who had been reproached and forgiven, Flair smiled and coquetted with him, then sat down at her dressing table again to repair her face. She imagined she still held Markie on the end of the line. He just wanted a little tug now and again to bring him to the surface. Most men were like that including Tony. And even *he* could get cross with her.

But she did not altogether know her husband. She was shallow. He was deep and she was unable to recognise or plumb those depths. He wiped the rouge off his face,

looked reflectively at the handkerchief but he did not smile.

"That was nice," he said slowly, "but I still say I don't want you to go on seeing so much of Tony."

Flair wanted to fly at him again but for once in her life controlled herself. She really could not face a show-down over Tony tonight. She wanted to enjoy the evening.

"Oh, all right, stop nagging, Markie. You really *are* jealous, aren't you?"

"No," he said unexpectedly, "I don't think I am. I just don't want to watch *you* destroy *yourself.* Never forget that I promised your father to look after you, my dear. Besides, I've also no intention of breaking up my marriage after what happened when my own home was broken up. It killed my mother. It's a rotten business, divorce. Once it starts things can escalate and lead to all kinds of miseries."

Flair finished outlining her lips and wiped her fingers on a tissue. "Suppose *you* stop being a misery. Let me have a happy evening. Why don't you take Henry to the cinema or something?"

"I wouldn't in the least mind doing that, but I don't think it would be a good plan."

"And why not?"

He shrugged, "It might give rise to gossip and be misconstrued and put things on a tricky basis for Etta — even provided she wanted me to take her out."

"Well, I can't recommend Marie-Claire — she's a dead loss," Flair laughed loudly, "but our Henry's attractive in a funny way."

It was on Mark's lips to tell Flair that he entirely agreed but instead he expressed surprise that Flair should want him to go out with Etta. Whereupon Flair laughed, all gaiety and good humour again.

"Darling Mark! I'm sure Henry would be delighted, but if you think it would be wrong — forget it."

"Time's marching," he reminded her coldly.

"Oh dear, I *shall* be late. I must phone Tony."

"While you're doing so, I'll tell Etta about your nails."

He went downstairs, feeling suddenly weak, and with another headache starting, and a great many new and troubling thoughts crowding into his mind.

Would Etta like him to take her out? Had he been right to say it might cause a tricky situation? Was it because of possible gossip should they be seen out together? Or because of Etta's reputation alone. After all, he was married, and her employer. It certainly wasn't because he didn't *want* to be with her. He could think of nothing nicer. Etta was a fine companion.

Such a suggestion coming from Flair could only mean that she was entirely indifferent as to whether he turned his attentions to their charming housekeeper, or any other girl. Not an attractive reflection. And he still hadn't extracted a promise from Flair to see less of Tony.

Later on, after Etta finished varnishing Flair's nails, she went downstairs to the hall to see her off. She thought Flair looked entrancing in her beautiful white evening dress. She had been gay and friendly during the manicure. The fact was, Flair actually felt a sincere affection for her cook-housekeeper. Henry was 'okay'. Flair used to feel pinned to the house before she came. Her presence here left Flair gloriously free to go out. But remembering how Etta disapproved of the way she treated Mark, she made an effort to hug and kiss him (for Etta's benefit) when he joined them in the hall.

"He isn't awfully well yet. Take care of him, Henry," she told Etta, and hearing the car coming into the drive, patted Mark's cheek and went out to join her friends.

Mark closed the front door.

"I'll get your supper now," Etta said with a covert look at him.

He certainly wasn't well yet, she decided. He looked

worse tonight than he had done this morning. No doubt he had had one of the customary battles with Flair. They never did him any good.

His dark grave eyes suddenly smiled at her.

"Come and have a sherry with me."

"No, I really must get the meal going, thanks awfully," she said.

He went to his dressing-room again, feeling curiously depressed. He half wished that he had taken his wife at her word and asked Etta to go out with him. Whether he felt fit enough or not. Almost he went down again to tell her that he would dress and give her a meal at the local pub, which had an excellent restaurant attached. But he decided against it.

While Etta prepared Mark's supper, she fought a mental battle of her own — an entirely new one. Seeing Flair all dressed up and ready for the night's gaiety had recalled nights in her own past life when she used to go out to dine and dance with Rod. He had been a wonderful dancer. Were those sort of good times at an end for her? Was life to be all work and no play? Much as she liked being at Green Alders — especially with Mark — wasn't there bound to be a serious showdown between husband and wife very soon? If so, and if this home broke up, where would *she,* Etta, come in?

She faced the possibility that she might at any moment find herself out on a limb and with not the slightest hope of ever seeing Mark — or either of the Trenders — again.

As she put on the white overall which she often looked on as a sort of uniform in her own private battle against rejected love, she experienced a new sensation. And quite an intriguing one.

She was growing far too interested in Mark — not only Mark, the employer, but the man.

8

At the beginning of August the cool wet summer was followed by warmer weather. During the weekends, the Trenders organised picnics on the river in their small cabin-cruiser. They used often to sleep aboard in the hot weather. This meant not so many parties at home or so much cooking for Etta. She had plenty of time off during the day.

There came a night, however, when she had to face up to another uncomfortable session with Rodney.

Rod and Claudia came down to Green Alders for a weekend. On Sunday they lunched at home, and Flair arranged they should take a picnic on the cruiser.

Etta prepared this, but in the end it was only for three people. Mark, Flair and Claudia. Not Rod. Suddenly after lunch he said that he was suffering from a migraine. He hoped nobody would mind if he lay down in a darkened room and let the others go out alone. Etta, who was in the dining room when he made this announcement, heard him say, "By the time you all get back I'm sure I'll be okay — I'll be fit as a flea for cocktails."

Claudia offered to stay with her husband but he wouldn't allow this.

"No, honey — you go along. Don't let me spoil your day. I'll be perfectly okay and if Flair doesn't mind I'll

have a good nap and take a tablet and be right as rain."

Etta heard all this as she was taking away the coffee. So far she had not looked in Rod's direction. Now she felt compelled to turn her attention to him. For a few moments she wondered if he really did have a bad headache. He didn't look very pale, neither did she ever remember him suffering from migraine in the old days.

He was sitting down, his eyes shut, but suddenly he opened them and looked directly at Etta. She could have sworn that he was grinning at her, the old impish smile she used to find so endearing.

"Any good recipes for curing migraine, *Mademoiselle Henri*?" he asked, using Flair's nickname for her with a dramatic French accent.

She gave him a cool reply.

"I'm afraid not."

Flair put in a word, "While we're all out, Henry, make him a nice cup of China tea with lemon and give him two aspirin, there's a good girl."

Now it was Mark who intervened.

"Flair dear, on Sunday afternoon and evenings, Etta goes out."

Flair shrugged and lost interest. She was exchanging confidences with Claudia. But Etta felt bound to look at Rodney again and tell him that of course, if he would like tea and aspirin she would see that he got them.

"How kind of you," he said, and grinned at her again.

Oh, I hate him, she told herself furiously as she walked away with her tray. He really has no tact — no nice feeling — looking at her, smiling at her like that — in front of his wife and everybody. Marian was right. He had a kind of devil in him. She wouldn't take him the tea. He wasn't ill at all. She'd go out.

By the time she and Marie-Claire had cleared away and finished in the kitchen, the other three had gone. Rodney put his head in the kitchen.

"China tea and aspirin for poor invalid?" he asked in a high-pitched voice.

Etta was caught. Marie-Claire had left. She was alone in the house. She had a suspicion that Rodney had manoeuvred this situation for some perverse reason of his own.

Rod leaned against the lintel of the kitchen door, pulled a fresh cheroot from its box and twirled it between his fingers. If he'd had genuine migraine he wouldn't be smoking, she thought scornfully.

"You must be feeling in need of a dark room," she said in a voice of ice.

"Of *course* I haven't got a migraine. You know perfectly well I don't suffer from such things."

She remained silent, at a loss for words.

"I wanted to be alone with *you* for a few moments," he said.

"I can't for the life of me see why."

"I don't think you realise how I've been feeling about you.'

"You've no right to be feeling anything about me. You're married to Claudia. What possible motive can you have for skipping that river party?"

"I repeat, I wanted a word alone with you. I'm still very fond of you, Etta. I thought you looked rather sad. I'd like to try and make up for what I did to you."

"You must be out of your mind," Etta said indignantly. "As it so happens I'm not in the least sad, and if I *were*, *you* couldn't make up for it."

He laughed. "You were always a great girl for arguing — quite a philosopher, in fact."

"How tiresome I must have been," she snapped.

"You weren't, darling — ever. You were always charming, and sweet to me, but we just didn't click where sex was concerned, did we?"

"If you mean I didn't want to go to bed with you before we got married, okay, we didn't click," she said bitterly.

"But you seemed prepared to put up with it right up to a week before the wedding. Wasn't that a bit peculiar — to say nothing of the effect it had on me."

He lit the cheroot carefully and took a breath of it before he spoke again.

"I admit I behaved shockingly, but I have already asked you to forgive me. It *was* rather a last-minute back-out, Etta, and I was a basket to treat you so shabbily. I think I hurt myself as well. I wasn't very proud of my behaviour. But Claudia had something for me — I couldn't resist her — that's all."

Etta marched to a cupboard that was half open, and deliberately banged it to. "Good. I congratulate you. I don't suppose Claudia is as difficult as I am or that she argues or debates with you. I repeat — I must have been tiresome."

He came slowly toward her. "Etta, you're being unpleasant. Do you hate me so much?"

"I don't feel enough about you to hate you. I'm quite indifferent."

As she said the words, Etta wondered if they were strictly true. But she knew that she was all mixed-up, and that this sort of discussion with her ex-fiancé was intolerable.

She turned to face him.

"Why didn't you go on the river with your wife and the others? Why do you want to rake the ashes and try to light another sort of fire? I'm not interested. Can't you accept that?"

He stuck his cheroot between his teeth and frowned a little.

"You've changed. You used to be much kinder."

"Then you see what you escaped — I'm not as kind as you expected."

Rodney Stone was not the man to be put off by Etta's present attitude. On the contrary, it intrigued him. This

hard sarcastic Etta who disliked him was in a queer way more exciting than the one who had been so sweet and soft — so romantic. It made her in a queer way more physically desirable, too — whereas her shy rejection of his over-passionate demands in the past had merely been what he termed as 'off-putting'.

He moved slowly towards her.

"Darling, do let's be more friendly. Claudia and Flair have become enormous buddies, and I admire Mark. We're bound to see a bit of each other, you and I. Don't go on punishing me. Oh, I know I deserve your absolute contempt, but, darling, I haven't committed such an awful crime, have I? Weren't engagements invented so that the two people could get to know whether they were really suited or not?"

"Okay," said Etta, "and we found we were *not* suited, so why make an effort to be friendly now? Besides, I'm an employee in this house and I'm not keen on entertaining guests in my kitchen."

Rod looked at the flushed face that he had once thought beautiful. He still thought so. Of course Claudia was quite different, she had an exotic attraction which was really more his line. He had admired and respected Etta. He thought it marvellous the way she did her job as a cook-housekeeper in this place. A tinge of his old desire for her returned as she faced him with that angry, tormented expression. Would she respond now if he put his arms around her and kissed those fine-cut lips as he used to kiss them? He knew how much she had loved him — wanted him, too, in spite of her reservations. Had suffering and loneliness after he left her taught her a lesson? He wouldn't mind trying to find out. With a swift movement he put down his cheroot and coming close to her, caught both her hands and kissed each one in turn.

"I've never really forgotten you, darling, in spite of my awful behaviour," he whispered.

She drew in her breath. She really hated him in that moment. She snatched away her fingers and caught him a stinging blow across his cheek.

"You — oh you — *words fail me*! Get out of my kitchen and stay out!" she said fiercely. "There's a rotten streak in you. I'm glad you didn't want our marriage. I regret that I ever thought I loved you, and I'm actually sorry for Claudia. Married or not, you're still incapable of sincere feeling — or of loyalty — and — and decency — and — "

She broke off, horrified because scalding tears had welled into her eyes — tears of rage rather than pain. She pulled a handkerchief from her overall pocket and dabbed her face. He grinned and patted his cheek.

"That was quite a crack, my dear. You wouldn't have hit me in the past. I can see you've developed quite a nice little temper. It suits you. Oh, Etta you always had gorgeous eyes. They look gold with fury today. Do you still wear your horn-rims for reading?"

Speechlessly she stared at him, then turned and ran out of the kitchen.

She locked herself in her bedroom. He didn't know whether she feared that he would follow her or if it was just that she was crying and wouldn't want him to see it, or that he had the power to make her cry. But she thought that perhaps his attempt to make love to her again even though he was newly married to the girl he had left her for, had finally killed her former passion.

She didn't go out. He didn't come upstairs. She didn't know or care where he was. She lay on her bed and tried to recover a sense of balance — and humour.

He was unspeakable. What Marian used to call 'a cardboard cut-out of a man' — all external show and charm — no real heart.

How idiotic of him to think that she would settle down

to an amusing flirtation. As if she was flattered that he had cancelled his river-run in order to stay with her.

She did not in fact move from her room until she heard the others come back. Then she crept out of the house and walked by herself along the towpath, trying to regain peace of mind.

Whatever happened in the future — whether she stayed at Green Alders or left — she prayed that she was not going to be forced to have to put up with a repetition of today's episode.

Why should she let him be destructive of her peace of mind, anyhow? It wasn't Rod whom she really missed or his so-called love? It was just that she missed being loved. Waking in the morning to face another happy day. Knowing she would be held tightly, closely, warmly, in a lover's arms. Had she, in fact, been insincere or hypocritical when she had denied him the final surrender? Was it only because she had wanted the orange blossoms on her bridal wreath genuinely to *mean* virginity? Or would it have been even more hypocritical to have gone to church with all the trappings of an untouched bride who knows she has already slept with her bridegroom? Etta knew that many girls thought nothing of it. Many were forsaking the Church for the Register Office, and honesty for subterfuge. Had she, Etta, been too smug in the past — too reserved? Oh, God, it wasn't that she hadn't wanted Rod as passionately as he had seemed to want her. She was *not* frigid. On the contrary, at times she had almost worried because of her own body's passionate response to Rod's caresses. But she had those principles and she wouldn't abandon them. It was as simple as that. And that was the beginning — *and* the bitter end of her affair with Rod.

Such thoughts had tortured Etta a long time after he left her. In her heart she was quite sure that if Rod *had* succeeded in getting her into his arms down in the kitchen just now she would not have liked it. She had been

genuinely outraged because he had made even such a mild approach.

Once back in her bedroom, she found a small twist of paper that had been pushed under her door. She felt hot and bothered as she picked it up, because she guessed at once who it was from. The well-remembered writing left her strangely cold.

Sorry if I upset you. I admit I'm a heel. Do forgive me and give me a smile when we meet again. R.

She tore this message into pieces, her face flaming. He had a colossal nerve. She had always known of course that he was a bundle of conceit — never one to accept rebuff easily. But she hadn't let that knowledge put her off in the old days. Everyone had their faults. She had refused to be too critical.

It'll be the dickens of a long time before you get a smile out of me, my lad, she thought, and now she began to feel better and went down to cook herself a scrambled egg for her supper. Marie-Claire was there putting salad, cold chicken and ham, fruit and cheese on two trays. The Trenders ate Sunday supper watching the television if and when they were alone.

As she passed the door, Etta heard voices. First Flair's, loud and argumentative, "Why can't we ask Arabella and her husband in to watch the damned television with us? I'm so *bored*, darling."

Her constant nagging reproach.

Then, from Mark, quiet and a little bitter, "Nowadays you always seem bored if we're alone, Flair. Look — you've had a busy day entertaining — do let's stay by ourselves this evening for once, and do — "

Etta heard no more. She hurried up the stairs. No thought for herself and her own troubles now. Her mind was full of Mark. He was facing impossible odds in this

marital fight with a girl who was as selfish, and even cruel as Flair.

Not long after this Flair knocked on Etta's bedroom door.

"Are you there, Henry? Or have you gone to sleep?"

Etta, in her dressing gown, had been brushing her dark silky hair. She opened the door.

"Can I do anything for you, Mrs. Trender?"

Flair looked Etta up and down, then shook her head.

"Mercy me! You can be so attractive when you try. Your colouring is lovely and I adore that apricot-coloured dressing gown — " she touched one of the long wide sleeves.

Etta smiled, "It's only an old candlewick thing."

"But the colour suits you. You've got a marvellous sort of camellia skin."

"Thank you, but I can't say I look much with my face all greasy like it is now."

"You can still look super. You're really very pretty, Etta. My husband is one of your great admirers."

"I don't see how you can say that, Mrs. Trender," Etta flushed and laughed. "Just take a look at yourself and you'll see what beauty can be." Etta meant it. Flair's golden tan had deepened after the afternoon's sun-bathing on the river. Her arms and neck were like satin and the pale blonde hair was very effective in contrast. Only her expression spoiled her — that petulant discontented droop of the pink sensual lips.

"Do you want me for anything special?" Etta asked again.

"No, I just thought we'd have a chat. I've left Mark listening to one of his awful political discussions on B.B.C. 2. He cares what happens to our country a lot more than I do. I loathe politics. Don't you ever get married, Henry — marriage is too depressing."

Etta seated herself at her dressing-table. Feeling

awkward, she picked up a file and attended to her nails. Flair had thrown herself on the bed and linked her hands behind her head. She looked even more seductive that way, Etta thought. No wonder Mark had been so crazy about her. Had been? Or was he still?

For the next ten or twenty minutes Flair talked about herself and the difficulties of being a good wife when one didn't have anything in common with one's husband. How she thought when she first married Mark that they were well-matched but it had soon become plain that they weren't. City men like stockbrokers could be pompous and dull, she laughed, although Mark was a great sportsman — she knew his Oxford friends made quite a hero of him. He was sweet to her and *could* be fun but lately she'd found him difficult. On and on she chattered, until Etta felt sick of her whining. She lifted her head and spoke rather sharply.

"You're being frank with me about your personal life, Mrs. Trender, I must be frank with you. I think your husband's a wonderful man and terribly fond of you. What more could you want?"

Flair sat up. Her big eyes gleamed. She giggled.

"I do believe you've got a thing about my husband, Henry. You always say such nice things about him."

Etta coloured again, but received this pointed remark calmly. Her answer was cool. "I try to look after you both, Mrs. Trender. Certainly I admire your husband. Everybody does who knows him."

"Well, I do too," said Flair, wrinkling her small nose, "but I don't mind telling you, as one girl to another, I find Tony Durrance a lot more amusing."

"Mrs. Trender, please don't tell me these things."

"I believe you're cross. Don't be cross, Henry, and do start using my Christian name. We're friends, aren't we?"

Etta walked to one of the windows. She pulled back the curtains and let the night air blow upon her. Her bed-

room seemed too full of Flair's perfume. Etta wished suddenly that she wasn't an employee here. She wished she could walk up to that bed and shake the beautiful outrageous girl and tell her what a fool she was and how absolutely inferior her baronet friend was in every way to Mark Trender. As for her 'having a thing about Mark' as Flair suggested so coyly — it was ludicrous.

Flair also stood up. Yawning, she repeated, "Henry, don't be cross. If my confidences upset you, I'll shut up, but I just wanted somebody to talk to. I can't gossip too freely with friends like Arabella or Claudia, or any of them around here. It's a sort of grape-vine, gossip about Tony and me would soon spread, if it hasn't already," she ended with a giggle.

Etta felt she could not resist being frank.

"Honestly Mrs. Trender, I know we're only the same age and it may be impertinent of me, but I must be honest and say that I think you'd make an awful mistake if you — " she stopped, pink with embarrassment.

Now Flair broke in with a laugh but in a friendly fashion. She patted Etta on the back. "Dear Henry, you're *so* nice! I know exactly what you want to say. You want to tell me how marvellous Mark is and that I'd make a mistake to exchange him for Tony."

"Yes," said Etta bluntly.

"I'll try to be sensible and think it over," said Flair with a wicked mischievous look from under her lashes. "Meanwhile, I think it's sweet of you to think of Mark. He said you were divine to him when he was laid up. I'm a selfish witch, and I know it. But we can't all be as conscientious as you, darling."

"Really!" protested Etta, "You make me feel a sort of goody-goody. I assure you I'm *not at all.*"

"But perhaps you don't know what it is to fall for a man — " began Flair, then corrected herself, "Oh, but,

of course, you *were* engaged once, weren't you? Do tell me about him."

"I'd rather not."

"Okay. I can't say I altogether understand you, Henry. You seem so awfully reticent and strong-minded. Oh, dear, I wish *I* were!"

"I'm not in the least strong-minded It took me a very long time to get over my affair," said Etta, "You can't just stand by and lose your faith in yourself even if you've lost it in someone else."

Flair yawned for the second time and shook her golden head.

"All too difficult for me, Henry dear. I only wish I were a fighter like you. But I feel I've only got one life and I want to live it madly while I can. You don't approve, so I'd better say good night. I really do like you very much and I'm so glad you came to Green Alders. Don't dare ever leave us, will you?"

Etta bit her lip. This maddening unpredictable girl! Oh, yes, it was easy to see why Mark had once loved her so. Yet she could be so despicable. And here she was asking *her* never to leave. It seemed she was being compelled to stay whether she wanted to or not.

Flair at the doorway, turned and said, "Good night, Henry. I know I can rely on your discretion about Tony and me."

"Yes, of course. Good night, Mrs. Trender."

"Oh, call me Flair, do," she said again, "and do be more informal when we're alone."

"Thank you very much," said Etta.

"Now I'll go along and give Markie a big kiss and make him happy," she said, and with this, she vanished.

Etta went to bed and switched off her table-lamp without opening a book. She shut her eyes. She wished she didn't feel so mixed-up and confused. Across the landing in her big beautiful bedroom, Flair was now no doubt in

the arms of her husband, and she was 'making him happy' in her shallow sensual way. It was all wrong. What was the good of surrendering that beautiful body of hers and giving him false hopes that she was still wholly his, whilst at the back of her mind she had every intention (at least so Etta believed) of leaving him, eventually, for another man? It was misplaced generosity on Flair's part — or else she was almost evil. Could good come out of the evil? Etta tried not to let her imagination run riot and to forget the 'reconciliation'. It aroused feelings that positively terrified her.

She turned a hot cheek against the cool linen of her pillow, and tried to laugh. But instead of laughing, she began to cry.

The day inevitably came when she was made a party to Flair's flagrant disloyalty to Mark. At the time Etta thought everybody had gone out — Flair, too. But she must have come back very quietly with Tony Durrance. They had been on the river together. It was a surprise (and an unpleasant one for Etta), when she walked into Mark's study, meaning to find a book to read, and found Flair in Tony's arms. Their attitude left little to the imagination. She tried to back out of the room without being seen, but Flair had heard the door open. Over one bare shoulder, she put up a protesting hand and waved Etta away.

Not a word was spoken.

Etta shut the door and walked into her own sitting room. She stood there a moment, trembling, cheeks hot, anger rising. The sight of the lovers had thoroughly upset her, not because she felt in any way fit to judge what other human beings did, rightly or wrongly — but because of Mark.

Almost at once Flair appeared. She was tying back the loose fair hair that made her look so young and innocent,

but there was no innocence in the brief, guilty look she gave Etta. She put on an act of bravado.

"You might have knocked," she laughed, "but you didn't realise I was back I suppose."

"I'm sorry," said Etta briefly.

"Me, too," said Flair, "Give me a cig, Henry, will you?" In silence Etta handed her a packet and a lighter. Flair lit the cigarette and blew smoke into the air. Then she gave Etta one of her honey-sweet glances.

"You're shocked. Don't be, darling. It isn't the end of the world."

Etta thought, *but it could be the end of the world for Mark.*

Flair seated herself on the little sofa and patted a place beside her. "Come and sit down and don't lose your sense of fun."

"I didn't find it funny," Etta snapped, "But it's no business of mine. Don't let's discuss it."

"We must. You're the only person I trust. I must talk to you, Henry. Try to understand. Tony and I are crazy about each other. Mark doesn't suit me."

Now Etta's eyes flashed. "You aren't interested I suppose in the fact that he is devoted to you?"

"Oh, I know it's all my fault," Flair said. "Anyhow, I've no intention, at the moment, of breaking up my marriage. I'm really very fond of Mark. But the break must come sooner or later. Still — don't let's be too serious. I want you to forget what you saw, will you? Oh, dear — you believe in honour and sticking to vows and all that. I think you're great. I wish I were like you, but I'm not."

Etta walked to the window and stared out. The lovely garden, this lovely house and Mark Trender for a husband — what else could a woman want? What was Flair made of? And the answer came quickly and sadly. Flair was the same type as Rod. They were two of a kind. The

difference was that Rod had been justified in breaking his engagement — cruelly though he did it. But this girl had no right to be unfaithful to her husband, yet still stay with him because it suited her to do so — merely sharpening the knife for him all the time.

"You live with us. You can't be blind to what goes on," continued Flair. "I may want a divorce one day. I'm crazy about Tony but I'm not quite stupid. *And* I'm fond of Mark in a way But listen, Tony doesn't want a show-down until his widowed mother dies, when he will come into more money, and in case there is a frightful fuss in the family. I know divorce is nothing these days, but the Durrances are sticky. Fortunately for Tony his grandmother has just died and left him money, but it's all tied up till the estate is settled, so you needn't think I'm going to do anything drastic now."

Etta could think of absolutely nothing more to say. But her thoughts about Anthony Durrance were not pleasant. He was everything she most disliked in a man and it made her shudder to think Flair could prefer him to Mark.

Flair added, "You're horrified, I know, Henry, but don't be. Try to understand and say you are not going to pack it in. After all you're not personally concerned are you? It's all outside *your* life and I need you here so badly."

With no colour in her face Etta spoke coldly. "You're quite right to say it isn't my business. But please don't use me as a sort of alibi. I'd rather leave than that."

"Oh, I won't ever again!" exclaimed Flair with fervour, "I know I can rely on you, Henry. You're terribly tactful."

No answer from Etta. She wished Flair would go away. In a queer way she couldn't help liking the wretched girl but not just at this moment.

"Please, Henry, don't be cross with me," Flair coaxed.

"Oh, *really*! I'm not cross but I've got to start the dinner," Etta answered her now in a curt voice.

To her dismay Flair put both arms around her and dropped a kiss on her cheek.

"*Darling* Henry, you're such a comfort to us all. I'll send Tony away at once, and Mark and I'll have a quiet evening. You'll be edified if I play the good little wife, won't you? See you!" And she was gone.

Etta stood for a time trying to forget Flair and Tony, watching the flight of a beautiful marked ring-dove flying from one fir-tree to another. How delicately it spread its wings! How grand the trees looked in the gloom light at this time of day. How extraordinarily attached she had become in a short time to Green Alders — *and to Mark Trender.* That final thought struck her not for the first time. She had just said she did not wish to be involved in the personal affairs in this house, but the sort of thing she had just seen had inevitably dragged her into Flair's affair. She would not be able to forget the sight of Flair and Tony when she saw Mark this evening.

She went into her kitchen and shared a cup of tea with Marie-Claire, trying hard not to let Mark's unhappy position affect her. Flair's conduct had disgusted her — yet who was she, Etta, to judge, she asked herself, only half listening to the Swiss woman's idle chatter. And why let Mark, himself, become so important in her life? It was absurd — and dangerous.

Whatever she felt, Flair seemed delightfully unaware of the havoc she caused, and gave Mark what she called 'a nice quiet evening'. And from that night onward, until another month passed, there were no more scenes or critical moments in the house. Etta felt almost lulled into a sense of security — wondering if Flair had really turned over a new leaf and meant to behave herself.

During this month, Flair and Mark went away to stay with friends in Gloucester. Flair, who was being particularly amiable to Etta, suggested that she, too, should go away. They could shut up the house. So Etta accepted

the offer of a three-day holiday. Her father and stepmother happened to be in London at this moment and she could go up to the flat and see them. So she spoke to her father on the telephone. He arranged to give her dinner at the Wesbury Hotel where he was staying.

One thing made Etta feel uncomfortable. The memory of the sadness in Mark's eyes when he said goodbye to her. He wished her a happy weekend quite cheerfully, but he looked strained — far from happy. He said, "I am sure you'll make the most of a few days without the Trender family, Etta."

Flair standing beside him, looking bored, turned on him.

"Why don't *you* call her '*Henry*' — it's much more friendly."

Then Mark gave Etta his quick boyish smile and said, "Etta knows perfectly well that we are friends — why not? And she doesn't really like the name 'Henry' so I call her Etta."

Etta laughed. Mark took Flair's arm and led her to the car. Etta went off to catch her train to Victoria.

But the sad sweetness in Mark's smile had gone straight to her heart. She was suddenly sure that he knew Flair was propelling their marriage in the direction of disaster but was still desperately trying to save it.

That night she tried to put both the Trenders out of her mind and to enjoy the rare pleasure of dining with her father. Sheila, her stepmother, was there — cheerful and amiable — Etta couldn't help liking her. She was also tactful and made an excuse to leave Etta and her father alone after they had dined in the restaurant of their hotel.

"You two'll want a chat," she said, "I'll pop up to our room and do some phoning to my chums."

The doctor seemed to Etta a bit thinner, but he was obviously content. His second marriage was a success. He spoke to Etta about her mother — with great tenderness.

"She was a marvellous woman, and you're like her in many ways, my darling girl. The same eyes — it gives me quite a pang."

"I never forgot her but I'm so glad you're happy now, Daddy. I'm sure Mummy would be glad, too."

"Are *you* happy? I must say you look tired and you seem rather nervy."

"I'm okay. Everyone gets tired. We all do too much today. Only I'm in the kitchen a lot and in the summer it can be a bit hot and trying, although I'm treated terribly well down at Green Alders.

"You really like this cooking job?"

"Love it. To turn out a really terrific dish well is as interesting and satisfying as any other achievement — and as creative. You have to use your brains as well as your hands. *And* I am appreciated by my employers, I assure you."

"So you ought to be," Dr. Hughes looked fondly at her. "I have a very lovely daughter — far too lovely to be — "

"Now Daddy, don't say far too lovely to be a cook," Etta interrupted, "because it isn't true. And, I'm quite okay."

"You've got over — " he paused and coughed.

Again she cut in, "Got over Rodney Stone? Oh yes, quite. In fact I've seen him down at Green Alders. He happens to be a friend of the Trenders. I couldn't care less about him these days. It was all a mistake and he's married the right person for him."

"Well, I'm delighted. I was rather afraid at the time you were badly hit."

"I was, but it was a lesson and I've learned quite a lot, hard though it was." She smiled as she said those words, and she knew them to be true. She felt a sudden strange release — a surge of her heart, her spirits. It was as though after being a prisoner of her emotions for a long time, she was now free.

Dr. Hughes lit his pipe. "Someone else, I'm sure, will come along, my love. You're an attractive child."

"Hardly a child any more," she laughed, "and there isn't anyone else at the moment, believe me."

"What sort of chap is this stockbroker you work for?"

"Mark Trender? Oh, he's a wonderful person. I admire him."

"And Mrs. Trender?"

Etta grimaced. "Not so hot, Daddy. Not nearly good enough for him although she's terribly pretty and physically appealing."

"Physical appeal is not enough for a man."

"You're right — it isn't."

"Do you think you'll settle down and stay with them? You only took it as a temporary job — at least you said so in one of your letters."

"I don't think they'll let me leave," she said.

But for the rest of the evening with her father and stepmother, it was Mark's lean face with the dark, sad, Sicilian eyes that haunted her. She didn't give a thought to Flair.

9

In early September Etta put through a telephone call to Marian.

"I shan't be able to come up to the flat next Thursday, honey. We're off to the South of France day after tomorrow and I've a lot to do. We're closing down the house."

"Great suffering snakes!" was Marian's reply. "When you say *we*, you mean *they* are going to the south of France and taking *you* with them?"

"Exactly."

"Isn't this rather a sudden decision?"

"Well, I've known about it for a couple of days but haven't had time to ring you before. One of Mark's clients — an American millionaire — I forget his name — has offered them the loan of his villa in Cap Ferrat for a month while he is in New York."

"Sounds gorgeous. But haven't they got a French staff down there?"

"Oh, yes, a chef and maids — the lot. But *I'm* needed. Flair has been rather under the weather lately. You were away on holiday so I don't suppose you know. She's had a lot of pain in her back. She went to an orthopaedic surgeon who said she had an arthritic spine and she's been having massage and short-wave treatment. Now her doctor thinks she needs warmth and sun. It's grown suddenly cold and

windy. She can't stand the cold. So Mark thought a month in Cap Ferrat would do her good. The villa is right on the rocks by the lighthouse — absolutely gorgeous, they tell me. Plus a heated swimming pool so she can swim which will be fine for her."

"Sounds delish, darling, but where do *you* come in?"

"I'm supposed to look after Flair," was Etta's answer in rather a grim voice.

"Darling, don't tell me you're a nanny now as well as a cook."

"Scarcely a nanny — but she needs a lot of waiting on at the moment, and you know I'm a doctor's daughter and I understand these things. I do good massage as well. Besides, the Trenders are really both frightfully nice to me and they think a month in the south of France might benefit *me*. I might as well go with them and help if I can."

"Well, I think it sounds smashing and I do wish you luck, darling."

During the month that followed Etta found that she was more than lucky. It struck her that there was some truth in the saying that '*When the devil is sick, the devil an angel is he* —'. Flair was gentle and amiable while she was in pain and did exactly as she was told. At least, until they moved into the Villa Véronique.

The place had a romantic air and Flair fell in love with it. Certainly the bright beauty struck a chord in Etta's heart.

They had flown down to Nice on a fine morning. It was glorious in Cap Ferrat — dazzling and warm. They drove from Nice Airport along the coast road — then at Cap Ferrat they passed the lighthouse and came to the Villa Véronique — a long, low white building overlooking the bright blue waters of the Mediterranean.

Flair clapped her hands ecstatically. "It's *divine* — I

know I'll get well here," she cried and lifted a face for Mark to kiss.

Etta was shocked by her own reaction to this sight. She wondered how long Flair's good humour and wish to be affectionate would last. She dared not look at Mark.

The front garden was vivid with carnations, fringing a lawn as green — if not greener than any in England. The reason of course lay in the tireless attentions of an old gardener who watered the grass continually through the hot summer weather.

A nice-looking Italian — Benno, the butler — with his wife Margherita, plump and smiling in a crisp pink overall, came forward to greet them. Benno helped to take the cases from the boot. Margherita, in broken English, announced that she would go and make tea for Madame, and that she hoped Madame would be very happy here. This, to Etta, whereupon Etta — hot in the face — informed the Italian that she was *not* Madame. She was Mademoiselle, and the beautiful girl with her long floating hair, standing beside Monsieur, was the lady of the house.

Flair heard this. She laughed. "There you are, Markie. Our beautiful sedate dignified Henry was taken for your wife. I'm not surprised. I suppose I look like the daughter!"

Mark did not find this amusing. He looked at her furiously, disengaged himself from Flair's arm, and announced in a surly voice that she couldn't look young enough to be his daughter and he hoped he didn't look old enough to be her father. Whereupon she giggled and said, "Of course you don't. I was only pulling your leg."

Etta was so embarrassed she stared speechlessly at the ground. Then suddenly she and Mark exchanged glances. For no particular reason both looked away again at once. As they moved towards the villa, Flair seemed disposed to be 'amusing' again. She tucked an arm through Etta's and said, "Come on, Madame Trender," and giggled.

Etta determined not to let this silly spoiled girl — so insensitive to the feelings of others — get the better of her. She gave a cold smile. Mark was silent. He was far too conscious of the fact that it might have been a better thing had the slim, proud dark-haired girl been, in fact, his wife. And because such a thought hit his consciousness he suddenly took both girls by the arm and said, "Quit fooling you two. Let's have a look at the bedrooms and stake our claims."

But Flair insisted in running straight through to the other side of the villa. "Oh!" she gasped, "It's *fabulous*! I'll very soon recover my health and strength here — I promise you both!"

The view was breathtaking — a silken panorama of sea and sky and the distant curve of the Côte d'Azur. The highest terrace was shaded by a violet-and-white striped canopy, underneath which stood a long green marble table with black Italian wrought-iron chairs. Little cushions fringed with white, matched the canopy. The rich colour was cleverly repeated by nature itself. Cascades of purple bougainvillaea spilled over the balustrade.

Marble steps led down to the second terrace, a garden bordered by little flowering bushes with long feathery leaves and a dazzle of vivid scarlet flowers. A charming pond full of little golden fish stood in the centre, with a diamond-bright fountain sprinkling the charming statue of a nude girl standing in a stone basin, her arms stretched above her head as though in ecstatic contemplation of the sky.

"Oh, look — look — goldfish!" exclaimed Flair. She and Etta watched them as they vanished through the green weeds under the delicate cream and pink water-lilies that floated on top of the water.

Flair made Etta follow her down more steps to the swimming pool. This was the last word in luxury. The water was a deep jade-green, clear as crystal. There were

diving boards, or submerged steps for those who didn't wish to dive; on one side palm trees, on the other a small bar and barbecue. Still lower down lay the rocks, black and glistening, from which the strongest swimmers could dive straight into the sea.

"What heaven! What a super holiday we're going to have!" exclaimed Flair.

Etta had to admit that Villa Véronique was fantastic. Mark joined them and added his praise. He felt that he badly needed this rest and change. The beauty of the villa and all that it offered held his attention for a moment but what he liked best was to look out to sea and watch a fine white yacht sailing across from the harbour. Beyond, his gaze caught also the red sails of a fishing boat. To feel the sun and wind against his face as he had done at Oxford, perhaps the cares of the City and the difficulties of his marriage would be temporarily submerged in the peace of this place.

"It's pretty hot — about eighty degrees, if not more," he remarked, and turned to the two girls. "We'll all go back with a mighty good tan."

"Let's unpack so that I can get into my bikini," said Flair. "I'm baked. The drive was awful — bumper to bumper! It's murder on this coast — far too many people."

"I'll unpack for you, don't move an inch," said Etta quickly.

"Oh, no — let's go through all the rooms together," Flair argued.

She limped now holding on to Etta's arm. Her back was aching.

Etta said, "Warm salt water should do you good. Your physiotherapist told you to swim as much as you can. Do take a quick dip."

"I think I'll take one too," said Mark. But it was he and not Flair who remembered to ask Etta to join them. "You, too, Etta. That is," he added, "if you like."

"I adore swimming," she said, "but you go on with Flair. I'll get unpacked and swim later."

"Will you come in with me?" Mark asked his wife.

She stretched herself in the sun, yawning like a cat.

"Not now. I'd just like to undress and lie down and close my eyes — on one of those gorgeous chaise-longues."

"A good idea, darling," said Mark. "Don't get cold."

Etta took only a cursory glimpse of the salon as she followed Flair through to the main suite which the Trenders would obviously occupy. She had just time to notice the beautiful French antique furniture in the lovely salon; thick white rugs on a polished floor, yellow-linen-covered chairs and curved yellow-velvet sofa; massses of flowers everywhere; a bookcase let into the wall, filled with books; a piano, and the inevitable television. The 'best bedroom' as Benno called it, was so sumptuous that it brought a gasp of admiration from Flair. She gripped Etta's arm.

"*Wow*! What a set-up — Hollywood films aren't in it. Your American millionaire must have paid a fortune to some interior decorator out here."

"It might be Max's own artistry."

She looked at Mark over her shoulder with a sly smile. "You couldn't have done all this "

He was quick to note the rebuke behind her words. She so rarely said anything nice to him nowadays, and so often criticised him, he felt almost indifferent.

He admired the glorious bedroom with its wide circular windows built so that one could see miles of blue sea and which must be marvellous, he thought, at night. The room was cool and inviting with white-and-silver wall-paper, pale apricot carpet and built-in whitewood cup-boards exquisitely painted. But it was the double-bed that attracted Flair. Above the studded white satin head, two wings of pale apricot gauze floated from a Napoleonic crown. A filmstar's bedroom, yes. Perhaps it had belonged

to the mistress of the Persian prince who built this villa, and who had lived here a hundred years ago. He had long since turned to dust. But whereas the beauty and the millionaire-luxury delighted Flair, it left Mark curiously cold. He thought of the dead lovers who had slept in this bed — the shortness of life, the cruelty of death, and the worse cruelty of all — dead love. He knew that he could never now take this young beautiful wife of his in his arms and pour out all the passion and love that she used to rouse in him. She didn't want it. Neither did he.

Quite by accident he turned to find himself looking straight at Etta. Her grave golden eyes were in this moment unexpectedly tender and compassionate. He flushed. He could not bear pity from her — or anyone. He walked quickly out of the room. He went into the less exotic, but handsome dressing-room, changed and went quickly down to the swimming pool. He dived with gratitude into the cool jade-green water, and tried to forget his troubles, to live for the present.

But Etta had to go on exploring with Flair, who continued to chatter like a magpie, and examine every detail of the villa.

"What a stunning bathroom! Look, Henry — it's all mosaic, blue and silver, and what a gorgeous bath! Like a silver shell. And that tank in the ceiling, with all those tiny little multi-coloured fish darting in and out of weeds. Isn't it *cute*? Do you think I'll be able to feed them while I have my bath? I suppose not. They must have an opening in the roof somewhere." She giggled, then as quickly groaned, "Oh, my back! I think I *must* lie down. No, I won't. We'll go and see the rest of the villa. Oh, Henry, what a wonderful month we'll have here! I'm glad you came with us."

"It's marvellous. I've never seen anything like it and I'm glad you think you'll be happy here," said Etta. But her secret thoughts were with the man who had walked

away so quickly. She had seen the naked pain of utter loneliness in his eyes.

Where is all this beauty going to lead? she asked herself. Will it soften Flair up a bit and make her nicer to *him*? But even as she fostered this hope, Flair destroyed it with a single sentence.

"Was that Markie diving into the pool — that splash? Yes, I can see him. Henry, darling, be a saint and get Tony for me on the phone. Put a call through to Marlow. Tell them it's urgent. If I know Mark he'll lie down in the sun after his swim. He won't come in just yet, and I simply must tell Tony to find some excuse for coming down to Cap Ferrat and staying with us this weekend. He'd go mad about it. We'd have such fun."

It was on the tip of Etta's tongue to refuse, then she thought, what's the difference? If *I* don't put the call through, *she* will, so it's all the same. Mark brought her here to convalesce and get well but she's not going to take care of herself or let *him* have any quiet. He's worn out. But she'll live just as hectic a life here as she did in England — more so. The Côte d'Azur will go to her head. She'll soon forget her arthritic back.

Sighing, Etta went into the salon and put the call through to Marlow. There didn't seem to be much delay. She unpacked as quickly as she could for Flair, who undressed, threw away the pillows on the big silver bed and lay naked and flat as her doctor had ordered. But she went on talking — talking — talking about herself, and all that she wanted to do in this paradise.

She had told Etta to take whichever one of the guest rooms she wanted for herself. Etta chose the smallest because it was more homely than the others and very charming, with typically French furniture and a magnificent view of the lighthouse. At night the flashing beams as they turned, were to become familiar to her. She found them friendly and soothing. She guessed she would spend

quite a few hours at the Louis Quatorze escritoire, writing to Marian, or to the father to whom she had felt closer since their last meeting. She had her own television in here. The servants had put flowers, fruit, books, chocolates, and iced fruit-juice in big jugs in all the bedrooms. Nothing was forgotten.

Once Etta got away from Flair whom she had to massage before she would close her eyes and sleep, Etta undressed and ran down to the pool, to swim. But Mark was no longer there. He had come in and gone to his own room to rest. Etta had the pool to herself.

For the first week all seemed to go well at the villa.

It quite surprised Etta to find how quickly Flair's physical condition improved. The sunshine, the swimming, the massage night and day, did wonders for her back. But the drink parties and Casino nights that rapidly took precedence in her curriculum, soon began to ruin much of the improvement. The American owner of the villa, before leaving Cap Ferrat, had told everybody about his friends who were arriving. Dozens of people telephoned, made dates for Flair and Mark to go to their villas, or to come to dinner or cocktails with the English couple. Life became one long party for Flair again, and Mark and even Etta were drawn into the vortex.

Margherita was a fabulous cook. Benno, helped by what seemed to be a stream of daily domestics, organised everything that Monsieur and Madame could want — wonderful lobster lunches on the terrace; exquisite dinners served in the beautiful dining room with the glass doors opening out to the velvet starry night. Certainly for the first time in *her* life Etta did not have to lift a finger to help. But she often thought, somewhat ironically, that she had never worked harder in her life than she had to do now trying to keep the peace between Mark and his wife.

The tired City man needed relaxation. He got it only when he rebelled and flatly refused to take part in her

activities. This, Etta saw, led to fits of bad temper from Flair. But she amazed Etta. Not even the pain in her spine prevented her from dancing, and flirting madly with any attractive man who came to her parties.

Anthony Durrance had come down to spend a weekend, stayed on and showed no sign of leaving. Mark was barely civil to him but Tony enjoyed life at Villa Véronique so much, and was so thick-skinned, no amount of snubbing drove him away. He was also far too confident that he had Flair well in tow.

Mark hardly discussed his wife with Etta, except on the subject of her health. It was only from Flair that Etta from time to time learned how things were proceeding. The spoiled girl would burst into Etta's bedroom and complain stormily of the latest scene she had had with her husband.

"He's always a spoil-sport and he's not nearly as easy-going as he used to be," she cried on one occasion. Etta looked at that beautiful angry face, marvelling at her physical beauty and hopeless character. She had achieved a golden tan in Cap Ferrat. Her hair looked as bright as the sun itself. It seemed that lovely and wickedly selfish though she was, she was totally unable to communicate with a man as nice as Mark. And she was taxing her own health and strength — regardless of the harm. The proverbial moth, Etta decided, singeing her wings in the flame. No longer afraid to speak bluntly to the girl, she had a sharp answer for Flair's latest grievances against Mark.

"You can't expect any man who calls himself a man, to go on being so tolerant with you. You're quite ruthless, Flair, and you know it."

Flair gave a hard laugh. "You see things from his point of view, sweetie. I've *had* him! All he says is 'don't go to this party', or 'don't ask those people to dinner', and so on. Don't, don't, *don't*!" she ended viciously.

Etta shook her head.

"Flair it's because he worries about you. You know you were told in England to go easy. What about your blood-pressure? What about those pills you say you can't be bothered to take? What about your *back*. You're often up till dawn. Then you take long drives in Tony's car up to the mountains, or into Cannes to shop and when you come back you're exhausted, *and* in pain. You can't deny it."

"Okay, if I'm doomed to die young, I'll die laughing," said Flair in a sullen voice.

"Don't be stupid. Who said you were dying? But do be more careful. Didn't Dr. Maxon warn you that because of that typhoid fever you had when you were a child, you've been left with certain weaknesses?"

"Oh, you're always on Mark's side," exclaimed Flair angrily.

The anger found an echo in Etta. She had been massaging Flair's back, now she administered a little slap.

"Okay — I'll pack up and go home. I doubt if I'm really needed. You've all the staff you need and more. I've begun to feel redundant. You could hire a trained masseuse and —"

"Oh, shut up, Henry, don't take me so seriously!" interrupted Flair, and turning her head gave Etta a dewy, appealing smile, "You know I count on you and Mark loves having you around. You can't leave us."

That was always the cry — the finale to any disagreement between them.

Etta somewhat uneasily faced up to the fact that she had made herself indispensable to the Trenders. As for always being on Mark's side — *yes*, she knew in her heart that she was, and as time went on she began to feel she could hardly bear the knowledge that had been forced on her, that Flair was no longer even faithful to him. Etta had noticed a definite change in Mark since they arrived at the villa. He had lost some of his good humour. His

nerves were ragged. He was neither as tender or as tolerant with Flair as he used to be.

The presence of Anthony Durrance did not help. Etta knew it. Often she wondered why Mark didn't tell him to get out. She supposed it was because in his heart he dreaded that if Tony was told to go, Flair might go with him. And Etta knew how repugnant the very idea of a break-up was to Mark.

But the moment came — and quickly — when he lost control. Etta happened to be in the room that day when Flair started an argument. Mark suggested that he did not think that the sunshine and change were any longer doing her any good and that he was thinking of putting an end to the holiday and taking her home.

She screamed at him, "But Max said we could stay for at least another two weeks. Okay! *You* go back to the City if you want, my dear hard-working Mark. I intend to stay on and enjoy myself here and Henry stays with me!"

He turned to Etta. She thought, *how terribly bitter his mouth is — how he's changed!*

"Does the gay life on the Côte d'Azur appeal so much to you?" he asked, with sarcasm. Then quickly before she could answer he added, "No, why should you be brought into this. I apologise."

Etta tried to get away but Flair seemed to want her to stay and stood in front of the door.

"You never want me to enjoy myself! I hate you! I hate you!"

An embarrassing scene followed, Mark accused her of deliberately ignoring doctor's orders and making a farce out of this so-called holiday; in the Casino until the early hours; drinking champagne as though it was water; behaving outrageously whenever the chance arose — how could she expect him to back her up any longer.

She screamed, "I won't be dragged home. I hate Green Alders. I like it here."

He said, "You're only killing yourself, Flair, and I won't stand by and watch you do it."

"I'd rather die having fun than go home and be bored by you," she said viciously.

Etta felt positively sick. She put a hand on Flair's arm.

"For God's sake, pipe down," she said.

"You take his part of course." Flair's face and voice were ugly now.

Etta felt hot with embarrassment. She did not know what to say or do. She was glad that Mark was standing up to Flair, but she wondered when the final break would come, and for Mark's sake alone she dreaded it. He, in fact, was fast coming to terms with himself. Right at this moment he was conscious that if he agreed to let Flair stay down here, and Etta stayed with her, it would be *Etta* he would regret leaving — not his wife.

Etta tried again to control Flair, but she raged on, "I won't be dragged home and I'll keep Henry with me."

"She may not want to stay," said Mark.

Etta put both hands to her hot cheeks.

"Honestly, I'd like to drop out of this — it's nothing to do with me."

Flair ignored this. "You love this place, Henry, and so do I and I can't do without you. But I am quite sure I can do without my dear husband and his nagging." Then she swung back to Mark, her eyes venomous, "And don't you be as rude to Tony as you were yesterday. You didn't even offer him a drink. I won't have you try and spoil my friendship with him."

Etta caught her breath. Flair must want to bring the whole pack of cards down upon her head. Etta hardly dared to glance at Mark. When she did, she could see that he was bitterly angry. He said, "Now that your friend Tony's name has come up, let me just tell you he's outstayed his welcome. When *I* leave the villa *he* leaves with me."

That was enough to produce a fresh hysterical outburst from Flair.

"I hate you — I hate you! I won't have you take Tony away. He's my greatest friend and tremendous fun, and he understands me better than *you* do. Oh —"

She broke off, sobbing hysterically. It was more than Etta could bear to be forced to witness more of this degrading quarrel. (So utterly degrading for Mark who deserved none of it.)

She turned and left the room. The last words she heard came from Mark — sharp and with new, cold authority.

"Get a grip on yourself, Flair, and don't say anything more. You might be sorry."

But Etta knew well that Flair would never be sorry for anything she did. She hated Mark now. She had lost all sense of proportion. She didn't even want to try and keep her marriage together. She was stupidly, blindly infatuated with Tony Durrance and all that a future with him could offer.

Etta shivered. She went out and closed the door, leaving husband and wife to themselves.

10

Later that afternoon Etta, who had spent an hour or two resting alone in her bedroom, gazed out at the lighthouse.

How fine and strong it looked! It stood there, a tower of strength — a perpetual friend to those at sea. The sight of it never failed to soothe Etta.

The emerald and blue of the Mediterranean had turned to violet now in the setting sun. In a few moments it would be cooler. Benno would light a wood-fire in the salon and switch on the central heating. The September nights on the Côte d'Azur were none too warm.

Etta stayed by the window for a long time, letting the fresh salty air caress her flushed face. She could not bear to think about the hopeless battle Mark was raging against Flair. It also struck her in this hour that her thoughts and feelings far too often circled around Mark.

A knock on her door made her turn from the lighthouse.

She heard Mark's voice, "Can you come and have a drink and talk to me a moment, please, Etta. I'm on the terrace."

"Of course."

She found him leaning over the balustrade, smoking. When he turned to her she could see how strained he looked. But he smiled.

"I've just poured out a small Scotch. Will you have a sherry?"

"No thank you. But I'm sure you needed that drink."

"I did," he said grimly.

"Where's Flair?"

"In bed. You know what she's like. She flies into these rages then collapses. I left her in tears, but I'm afraid I did not stay with her. She's only crying because this time she can't get her own way Honestly Etta, I don't know what to do for the best. I've tried everything. Nothing seems to work."

"I know," Etta said in a low voice.

He looked at her and felt curiously comforted.

"You see everything, my dear. It's all rather a tragedy, isn't it? And you get drawn into these ghastly rows. You must regret ever taking a job with us."

"I don't. Honestly, Mark, I never do."

"Then it's very good of you, but you can't enjoy it. I'm afraid Flair is quite unpredictable and uncontrolled. She doesn't care who else is involved. I might have guessed she'd cut up when I told her I'd 'had' Tony Durrance."

Etta looked out to sea. The lights on the curving coast were beginning to twinkle in their thousands. She tried to think of something helpful to say, but failed. She dared not discuss Tony — she knew too much.

"If only Flair would co-operate over her health," said Etta, sighing. "It's so stupid. I thought she said herself she needed rest."

"Things never work as you expect with Flair. One moment she's in pain and all helpless and frail, and you want to do everything you can for her. The next moment she's throwing herself into mad gaiety as though she's never been ill. And it doesn't in fact seem to hurt her except she gets backache. But the damage will soon show

itself. I want to get her home. The villa has not been an unqualified success."

"I have talked to her, Mark, but it doesn't seem to do much good."

He said suddenly, harshly, "I won't have Tony Durrance in the place any more."

Etta nodded.

"A lot of women seem to find him attractive," Mark went on. "He's a conceited sponger and he uses his title to get places. The American women all go for him because he's *Sir* Anthony. No one seems to mind that he never puts his hand in his own pocket."

"He just *takes* and I notice it's you who pay for all the extras," said Etta.

"I can't bear him, quite frankly, Etta."

"Nor can I," she admitted.

Mark suddenly relaxed. The tension caused by Flair's conduct seemed to ease now that he was alone with Etta.

"You're remarkably observant. But I'm glad that you agree with me about our noble baronet."

"Not much nobility about *him*," Etta laughed drily.

"He seems to attract my wife," said Mark. And Etta, looking up at him felt a twinge of uneasiness. How much *did* he know about his wife and Tony?

"Try not to worry," she said. "These things pass, don't they? Flair's always sorry after her outbursts."

"Not this time. All she wants is for me to get out and leave her here with you and enjoy herself in Cap Ferrat. She refuses to go home and unfortunately Max isn't due back from New York for another week. Until then the villa is ours which she knows."

"Oh, dear!" said Etta, and locked her fingers together and looked rather helplessly down at the sea below. The light was fading now. The gardener had switched off the fountain. Villa Véronique seemed to be wrapped in an unusual silence. She had never known it so still. Almost

as though some unearthly mystic forces were at work, she became strangely aware of Mark's presence — his nearness to her on this lovely tranquil night, but conscious of the fact that her feelings were far from tranquil. Her heart was pounding unusually fast.

Mark spoke again, "I suppose I can't force her to go, but I'll not leave our friend Tony behind, that I promise you, if I have to knock him down and have him carried on to the plane."

Etta was almost shocked. It was so unlike Mark — moderate, easy-going Mark to be violent. She wasn't at all sure that he actually suspected Flair of infidelity, but the whole position was confusing. Mark finished his whisky and turned to her again, his dark luminous eyes questioning.

"Etta, what's gone wrong? Is it my fault that my marriage has come to this?"

Etta's answer was spontaneous. "No, it *isn't*! I think you're the best husband in the world. It's just that Flair — oh, Flair has this queer streak of childish irresponsibility. She's like a child. She has a good time whether it's the right thing or the wrong. No matter who she upsets. It's nothing to do with *you*!"

"I'm glad you think so," he said, then was silent. He had been feeling desperately worried and disturbed all day. His love for his wife was dead. He had realised it just now when he stood by the bed watching Flair weep and beg him not to be cruel, and spoil her fun. He was, in fact, suspicious about her association with Tony which lately had seemed far less harmless than before. While he was married to Flair his responsibility toward her remained. But her immaturity, her hopeless egotism and the constant strain she imposed on his patience, had become intolerable.

Over the question of Tony he remained stubborn.

"I shall go back to England tomorrow and take Tony with me," he said. "He's gone to St. Jean de Luz with

friends for the night and won't be back till tomorrow. I'll deal with him then."

Etta's heart sank. She felt helpless.

"Do you want me to stay on at the villa with Flair?" she asked in a low voice.

"Perhaps I haven't the right to ask you to, but as things are — in case Flair refuses to come with me, I'd like you to remain here. You like it in this place, don't you?" he added the question nervously, anxious not to impose on her.

"I think it's gorgeous. The villa — the garden — the whole thing — but I won't be able to stop Flair from doing what she wants, and it could become terribly embarrassing. Besides, if you go back to Green Alders, who is going to cook and look after you? I know Marie-Claire can't really do it all, even with Mrs. Box to help her."

"Don't worry about me, please. It'll only be for a short time and then my friend Max will want Villa Véronique back and Flair will *have* to come home."

In a sudden wild unguarded moment Etta spoke as she felt. "I'd so much rather go back with you — look after you, Mark. Take me with you — please."

He saw to his amazement that she meant what she said. Those strangely beautiful eyes of hers were pleading — sparkling with warmth and sincerity. He felt unaccountably moved.

For months now she seemed to have made life much easier for him and been so good for Flair. He was in her debt. He would always remember her kindness and unselfishness while he was ill. At times, before this night, he had been conscious of her in a more intimate way. But tonight for the first time, he felt as a man feels about an attractive and quite beautiful woman.

It had been a long time since Mark had received any response from Flair. There was neither understanding nor

harmony between them. He had lain at her side, yet felt poles apart. With Etta he felt he was needed. And this lovely, capable girl with her sympathetic personality and her wisdom, wanted to go back to Green Alders with him — to look after *him* instead of Flair. Suddenly she became of vital need to him.

He felt a surge of feeling — quite removed from his admiration of her as an employee or a friend. Something much, *much* more.

He looked a bit dizzily into the green-gold shining eyes. Then suddenly he put both arms around her. It was as though they were drawn toward each other irresistibly. She responded to him at once, laid both hands on his shoulders, and lifted her face to his.

In the stillness that had fallen upon them, in the serene beauty of the velvet dusk, they seemed suddenly to become one, holding each other close. Mark's hands caressed the slenderness of her body. He found it unexpectedly feminine and desirable. She was no longer the girl who run his home and cooked the meals, and did a hundred and one jobs for Flair or for himself. She was all woman tonight and very alluring. His fingers threaded through the dark silk of her hair and touched the smooth sun-tanned cheeks and tender throat, moving away a gold chain that she was wearing. Then his hands clasped her waist. He found it firm and supple. All this time she stood with her eyes shut, her fingers locked around his neck. Her body trembled.

Mark had only had one love in his life other than Flair. She also had been of the petite, childish type he used to find so appealing. But this love was different. He had changed and he knew it. He needed strength for his strength — generosity in return for his own — the glorious affinity he had found with Etta. Suddenly she was warm and exciting. She possessed the kind of strength which was spiritual as well as physical, and it had a fantastic effect

upon him. It was as though nothing else in heaven or earth mattered but only Etta. Time stood still for them both. And there seemed to him nothing wrong in his holding and caressing her in this way. It was so right — so inevitable — and so sweet.

Hungry for her lips, he began to kiss her. He was astonished and delighted by the passion with which her firm sweet mouth returned his kisses.

Standing there on the terrace they seemed to melt into one figure, inseparable, infinitely full of joy, enshrouded only by the purple shadows, and with no sound around them except music which came from the distance. Benno and Margherita were playing one of their Italian records — a nostalgic song of love.

Mark lifted his head and murmured, "Darling, oh you darling! How sweet, how dear you are!"

Etta, surrendering as completely as Mark to the passion of the moment, opened her eyes and smiled at him in a way that he would never forget. She whispered, "Mark, *Mark*, please don't go, or let me follow you. Let me go home, with *you, please.*"

He answered, "You know that I can't. You know it all too well, Etta, my love, although you have become my very dear love and life."

"Am I really your love?"

He held her closer and put his cheek against hers. Her face was burning.

"You know that you are," he said. "I didn't realise that I was in love with you until tonight, but I am. You're everything I have ever needed — and that any man could want."

"It isn't true!" she said wildly, "I can tell you about another man who once wanted me."

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know. It never meant anything anyhow."

"Oh, Mark, *Mark*!" She gave a little moan and pressed

her eyes against his shoulder. The wildness was leaving her. This was sweet and wonderful and although she had once thought she would never replace Rodney Stone, she had found all that her heart desired in Mark. But of course he was right. He had to leave her. There could never be anything but friendship between them. He was married and Flair remained an insurmountable barrier.

"I adore you," Mark whispered against her ear, and again the touch of his lips on hers made her tremble. "Because of this I've *got* to say goodbye to you, my dear one, and the sooner, the better."

Etta knew that this was true. Her whole being which had been so exalted — slowly sank into the stern depths of reason — of a reality that she did not really want to face.

She drew away from Mark and smoothed back her tumbled hair. The colour had left her cheeks.

"I understand — you couldn't be more right," she whispered.

The silence that fell between them then was full of an immeasurable sadness and constraint — as though neither dared seek to recapture the ecstasy of the first mutual discovery that they loved each other.

Mark, fingers trembling, lit a cigarette and looked long and sadly at Etta. It was as though the fact that she had ever been a domestic worker in his household had never existed. They had stepped right on to another plane. But it was a plane from which he knew they must descend. It must remain out of reach. It brought with it far too many complications — and definite danger. They must be as they had been before, good friends. But even as he considered this, Mark gloomily asked himself if it would be possible, or if this sudden revelation of the love for each other meant the point of no return.

Whatever they said or did — whatever happened in the future — Etta mus inevitably remain now and for always

the woman he loved. Neither could he deny that his past love for his wife was dead. She had killed it. He recognised that it had been little more than an infatuation — the folly of youth and inexperience. Nevertheless when he thought of Flair — her strange mixture of the appealing child and the heartless self-centred wife, he tried to go on pitying her. She was destroying herself as surely as she had destroyed his love.

Apart from this he must also consider Etta. She was a wonderful person. He had no right to upset her and her life. Already he felt guilty because she had fallen in love with him, yet how could that have been prevented? The strong attraction they had for each other had grown gradually — now it was too late to deny it. He knew now the measure of her regard for him. She was not a woman to love lightly. All through the years with Flair it had been one-sided. He realised at last what a deep and passionate love between a man and a woman could mean. But there could be no hole-in-the-corner affair with Etta.

She turned now and spoke quite calmly to him, although he saw how pale and shaken she was. She tried to joke.

"I really will have to hand in my notice now, won't I?"

"Nonsense. You're to do no such thing."

"But you can't want me to stay —"

"My dear, whatever happens in the future, please don't run away," he broke in. "I have made it quite clear, haven't I, that my marriage is washed up, but I swore to look after Flair and I won't go back on my word. I've told you what it meant to my mother when my father quit. I can't do the same."

Bitterly, Etta compared his attitude with Rod's. Rod — the man without a conscience. Mark was the exact opposite. She tried to be strong-minded but almost weakened when she looked up at him through the ever-increasing darkness. After the heat of the day, the little wind blowing off the sea felt cold and she shivered.

"Of course," she said, "you must never desert Flair."

"You must help me," he said. "She relies on you. I think she trusts you and is sincerely fond of you these days. She hates me — I'm just the barrier to all she wants out of life, so I need your support, Etta."

Not for the first time Etta wondered if he knew that Flair and Tony were lovers, and that she was merely biding her time before she went off with him. Or was it just that Mark didn't *want* to know. He was obsessed by the memory of the past and the havoc divorce had wrought in his mother's life. The strong must at all costs protect the weak. That was his rule in life.

Suddenly she ran to him and seized both his arms.

"People used to tell me that I am too reserved and too cold, and in consequence difficult to love. Oh, Mark, it isn't true! It's just that I've never before known what it is to love as deeply as I love you. You've changed me completely. I hardly recognise myself. Oh, Mark, Mark, I can't bear the idea of parting. I can't face up to the thought that when all this is over and Flair and I are back in England, I've got to pack up and remove myself from your life."

He was deeply moved by her words. She was right. Love had transformed her. She had become a warm trembling girl — a new Etta with passionate mouth and beautiful desperate eyes. She roused everything that had lain sleeping in him after his experiences with Flair.

He forgot the present difficult circumstances and, as he afterwards told her, lost his head, and he wanted her to lose hers. He pulled her roughly into a mad embrace. It exhilarated her — filled her with passionate joy. They clung together exchanging long urgent kisses. His fingers pushed the dark tumbled hair back from her forehead, traced each feature of her face and now in the darkness that had so suddenly fallen, he fancied he could see the

stars mirrored in her eyes, and felt too that there was nothing left for him to want on earth or in heaven.

"Oh, God, I love you so much, Etta! I'd give my whole life to be able to take you away with me. I love and adore you. Darling, *darling* Etta, I feel I can barely control all that I do feel for you."

She pressed her face against his shoulder. Wildly emotional, she burst into tears.

"I feel the same. I'm half off my head. Oh, Mark, what can we do?"

That simple question cut down the fever of his thoughts and his desires more surely than any discussion on morals or principles could have done.

He released her, then put an arm gently around her.

"Come indoors, darling. Sit down quietly beside me for a moment. And don't cry. *Please* don't cry, because that will unnerve me. I must keep cool and so must you, my beloved girl, or we'll both regret it."

In the salon, sitting beside him on one of the velvet sofas facing the sea, she sat still, leaning close to him, both her hands tight locked in his. While the tears poured down her cheeks, she gradually regained her control. Drawing the back of one hand across her eyes she gave a short laugh.

"Sorry, Mark, sorry, darling. Nobody any more will be able to say I never lost *my* self-control, will they?"

He lifted the hand, moist with her own tears, to his lips.

"It was wonderful just now, I mean, when you lost control. I lost mine, too. Consider yourself lucky that I didn't take you by the hand and run you down to the rocks and plunge with you into the sea."

She laughed and wiped her eyes again. Madness had passed. A sensation of tremendous love and grief remained.

"Darling Mark, where would we have swum to? There isn't anywhere in the world we can go together."

"I know it," he said, "And you know how much I'd adore to disappear with you and just live with you alone in some lovely place from which we need never return."

She closed her eyes. She felt utterly exhausted.

"Mark, you don't know what it means to me to hear you say such lovely things. I shall store them all up and remember them for a long time to come."

"Don't let's think of that," he said abruptly. "Just now when we kissed, we both realised that what we feel for each other is such that we couldn't go on living in the same house and be just friends — could we? I must just go on doing my best for Flair until I'm positive she doesn't need me any more. Then — well, for God's sake, Etta my love, there *is* one door open. Let it stay open. But just don't let's talk about it."

She knew exactly what he meant. Flair was the stumbling block and the barrier. If ever that barrier was removed because Mark could no longer accept it, then life might be very different. She drew a long deep sigh.

"You're quite right. Just don't let us think or talk about it any more," she whispered.

"Can you bear to stay here and help her if she decided not to go with me? You seem to give her more self-confidence than I can," he said.

She nodded, but wondered uneasily what Flair really meant to do. *Would* she stay at the villa if Tony was forced by Mark to leave. Would she cast discretion to the winds and tell Mark how things really stood?

Mark got up — took a cigarette from a box on one of the tables, lit it for her and put it between her lips, then lit one for himself. Benno was out on the terrace now lighting the little lamps along the balustrade. Then he came into the salon and in his courteous way bowed to them both.

"Monsieur, Mademoiselle — an English gentleman has just called and would like to see you."

Etta sprang to her feet.

"Let me get out and go to my own room, please." She felt dazed and didn't want to talk to anybody else tonight.

"What name did he give, Benno?" asked Mark.

"Mr. Rodney Stone, Monsieur."

Etta flushed scarlet, put a hand to her lips and muttered, "Oh, for heaven's sake! That's all I need."

Mark did not hear this.

"What can Rodney Stone be doing down here?" Mark asked, and added irritably, "I'm not keen on having him here."

Nor I, thought Etta grimly, but remained silent.

"Oh well, I suppose I must be polite. I'll tell Rodney, and Claudia if she's with him, that Flair is laid up."

"But Benno only announced 'an English gentleman'. He seems to be alone."

Mark said, "Be an angel and come back in a moment and help me entertain the fellow, Etta. You and I will have another talk together — perhaps later tonight or tomorrow."

She looked up into his eyes. She felt again the indescribable joy and astonishment that had filled her whole being when she was in his arms.

It seemed to her incredible that she had once loved Rodney Stone and that it was all so different. Now Rod meant absolutely nothing. It was as though she had been waiting all her life for Mark — only for him. And more marvellous than anything was her amazing discovery that *he* was in love with her.

II

Etta had no time even to go and tidy her hair or powder her nose. Into the salon came Rod — Benno had brought him in through the terrace.

Etta gave him a quick embarrassed glance which he returned with a grin. Her emotions were utterly confused.

"Hi! How nice to see you again, Etta. Hi, Mark! Hope you don't mind me dropping in on you unannounced, but I'm working in Monte Carlo on a B B.C. job which entailed a few personal interviews with celebrities, so I thought I'd look you up en route."

"Delighted," said Mark without much conviction. "Benno, bring in the drinks," he added.

"Is Flair around?" Rod continued, "I'm afraid I've left Claudia in London. I've only got forty-eight hours down here and she was too busy to get away, anyhow."

"Flair's laid up," said Mark briefly, "I'll go and have a word with her." He disappeared.

"And how are you?" Rod asked softly and came towards Etta.

She had made an attempt to straighten her hair and was thankful the soft lamplight made it hard for Rod to see her too plainly.

"I'm fine, thanks. Flair will be sorry not to see you."

"No welcoming kiss for your old chum?" He came still nearer her. His tone was jocular — he seemed in gay spirits, but Etta froze. All the wild-rose colour, the thrill, the glory that had been hers tonight, had evaporated. Rod's presence — the very way he looked and talked to her in that intimate way, spoiled everything. She could not bear the thought of what had been.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, "we're not on kissing terms any more."

He narrowed his eyes but went on smiling.

"H'm, I feel a chilly wind blowing through the hot night," he continued to joke.

Before she could think of a reply, Benno returned with the cocktails and Margherita followed with a tray of sliced lemons, little dishes of black olives and salted almonds.

Etta moved towards the door — anxious to get away.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll go and see Flair," she said hastily, and started towards the door.

Rod barred her way.

"Her husband's with her. *You're* with me. Why not keep it that way?"

Now Etta was conscious of the same anger he had roused in her when they last met. She was rapidly learning that out of the ashes of their dead love there had sprung bitterness and something very near to hate. Because of this, she reproached herself. He could not be serious. He was just stupidly trying to play the old game. It was his incorrigible desire to prove that he could fascinate any girl if and when he wanted to. He had always been insufferably vain, and where once Etta had tolerated it because she had found so much else in his favour tonight it annoyed her. He seemed shallow and worthless compared with Mark.

The two servants placed their trays down on a marble-topped table at the other end of the salon, underneath a

striking portrait of one of Max's four ex-wives. Quickly Etta tried to return to normal and walked towards the drinks.

"Mark will be back in a moment but do pour yourself out a cocktail while you're waiting."

"No — I'd rather wait for the master of the house," Rod answered. "What's wrong with his pretty little wife?"

"She's laid up. She isn't very strong, and she gets sudden attacks."

"Is the noble baronet around?"

"If you mean Tony Durrance, yes. But he's not here at the moment."

"And are you enjoying your session in this civilised spot, dearest Etta?"

"I don't really find the south of France very *civilised.* It all depends what you mean by the word."

"There's a really Etta-like remark. You mean everybody's busy enjoying themselves all day and half the night, and you're keen on the workers "

Now Etta's beautiful eyes glowered at him.

"Don't let's discuss me."

"But you don't think people ought to spend their lives having fun and games."

"Not all their lives — no. Well — *you* work, too," she reminded him, wishing either that Mark would come back or that she could get away from Rod without being rude.

"All the same I don't say I wouldn't like to cruise up and down this coast all year round in a millionaire's yacht," he grinned.

"I've met one or two millionaires since I've been down here who are most unhappy people. The man who owns this villa has been married and divorced at least four times. He's never happy."

"Well, if you don't succeed at first, you've got to try, try again," Rodney remarked drily.

Etta stared out at the darkness of the night and the little golden globes of light from the lamps on the terrace. Suddenly Rod came up to her and before she could prevent it, pulled her into his arms.

"Relax, darling, relax! You're always much too tensed up. I don't like my women to be so taut and analytical. You're still a damned attractive girl and you look gorgeous with that Côte d'Azur tan."

"I'm not one of your women and please let me go." she whispered fiercely. "Somebody might come in. You must be mad."

"Is that the only reason you want me to let go of you, because someone might come in?"

"You're impossible. You don't know how much I dislike you."

He went on holding her tightly.

"*Do* you dislike me or is it just put on? I thought all was to be forgiven and forgotten and that we were going to be chums."

She struggled violently, her cheeks hot. His touch, his nearness made her realise to the full how completely her feelings had changed. She opened her lips to make some scathing remark but Rod closed them with a kiss that infuriated her.

"You see how you still tempt me," he said breathlessly. "Don't look so furious, sweet Etta. Claudia wouldn't mind."

"But *I* do."

"Ah, try and relax," he begged her again, "I used to like kissing you — don't you remember?"

"How you can *say* things like that! You're married and I'm not out for a petting party. Get that into your mind."

Rod gave her a sidelong glance which she used to find disarming, but which in this moment she found quite sadistic. It was as though he enjoyed upsetting her. But

she was also gloriously conscious of the fact that his jibes could no longer hurt.

"My darling, you were always a little old-fashioned," he murmured. "And I never *was* the decent-fellow type. Do you disapprove of kissing me just because I'm married?"

"No — not because of that at all. I just don't like it. Can't you understand — all *that's* over between us."

"And don't carry a torch for Claudia," he said suddenly, "She's not the outraged wife type. We're both of us tolerant of each other."

She looked at him speechlessly. He was still very handsome but so self-indulgent — so dissolute. She had been in love with love — not Rodney. Only dear old Marian had recognised the real man.

At this moment Mark came into the salon. Not alone but with Flair — Flair actually changed, made-up to the eyes, hanging on to his arm and giggling in the old childish way, as though she hadn't a care in the world. She ran forward and gave both her hands to Rod who kissed her on the cheek.

"Hi, Flair — lovelier than ever!"

"Hi, Rod — what a nice surprise," she said. "No Claudia?"

He explained why she was not with him and why he had come down to the Côte d'Azur. Etta looked at Mark. He looked back at her. It seemed to her that there was a whole world of poignancy in that long exchanged glance, and a whole world between them too, she thought, in anguish.

How incredible it was to see Flair who a short time ago had been like a little lunatic in the middle of a searing scene with Mark, now playing the happy wife and gracious hostess in a long shimmering dress of greeny-blue organza with two long ropes of pearls — the latest thing which she

had made Mark buy her in Monte Carlo yesterday. What a changeling she was! And how anyone could look so beautiful and yet be so cruel, Etta really did not know.

"This calls for a party," Flair spoke again gaily. "How about you getting on a pretty dress, Henry, and coming with us? Let's all go to Beaulieu and dine in the casino, then have a tiny gamble."

Etta did not look in Mark's direction.

"Thanks awfully, but I'd rather you didn't include me. I've had a rotten headache all day. I don't think I could take the hot casino."

Rod excused himself on the grounds that he wished to wash his hands. Mark poured himself out a drink. Flair, not deterred, attacked the girl she called 'Henry', putting on all the charm.

"Do come. I hate a threesome. Don't be difficult, sweetie. It's too late for me to get hold of anyone else and you'll make up the four. At least come and have dinner."

Ordinarily speaking, Etta would have enjoyed a good meal at Beaulieu where the food was perfect and the Casino one of the nicest on the coast. Although she didn't gamble she quite enjoyed watching the game. But tonight she really felt that her head was spinning. She had passed through an emotional storm. She couldn't bear to go out with Mark *and* Rod.

Flair turned to Mark. "Make her come with us, Markie."

He gave Etta a quick glance. She was very pale and there were dark shadows under her eyes. He felt badly about the whole affair. As far as he was concerned all he wanted was to be alone with Etta. He had hoped for a peaceful evening — never dreaming Flair would make such a quick recovery. He certainly didn't want an evening gambling and drinking with her and a man he hadn't taken to from the start.

"Etta can do what she likes," he said shortly.

"You really are bad-tempered these days, Mark. I suppose it's all because I don't want to go back home tomorrow, and I warn you, I won't unless Tony comes with us," Flair added spitefully.

Mark set down his drink. His lips were thin. Etta had never seen him look so grim. He said, "Don't let's start on all that again, please, Flair. You know perfectly well what I want you to do, and what *I* intend to do about Tony, so let's leave it at that. Rod will be back in a moment."

Flair disappeared. Mark drew closer to Etta. She was such a beloved person and he loved her so much. How tragic that she was as inaccessible as the stars.

"Are you all right?" he asked in a low voice. "Please don't worry about the party. If you don't want to go out with us, you needn't."

She looked up at him with doubt in her eyes.

"Flair will think I'm a wet-blanket, but Mark — I'd just rather not join the party."

"I understand," he finished as she paused. "Of *course* please do just as you wish."

A great wave of depression drowned her.

"Oh, Mark, *Mark*, what's going to happen? Where are we all heading?"

"God knows, my darling." The endearment came naturally. But he made no effort to touch her.

"I thought Flair had collapsed and was really ill," added Etta.

"You know her. She adores entertaining. As soon as I told her Rodney Stone had turned up she forgot how ill she felt and rushed to her bath."

"*Has* she agreed to go back to England with you?"

"No, she's counting on me changing my mind and getting her own way. But I fully intend to tell Tony how I feel — when he gets back — tomorrow morning possibly.

He won't want to stay by the time I've finished with him. I'm neither blind nor an idiot, Etta," Mark went on, "I've known for some time that Flair has been getting more and more involved with Tony. No doubt she'd like very much to be rid of me now that I'm not her willing slave any more. She'd love to become her ladyship and enjoy all that carry-on. It would suit her down to the ground. Tony moves in the set she adores. But he really is no good to her. I honestly take a lot of the blame for what's happening. I was crazy about her at first. Perhaps I just talked her into marriage."

Now, suddenly, humour returned to Etta. She said, "Oh dear, *dearest* Mark! You wouldn't have had to talk *me* into it!"

He smiled with her. They stood looking at each other.

"Oh, I do love you," he said under his breath.

"I love you," she echoed.

"But our saying so won't get us out of the present *impasse*. I want to walk out of this villa with you now and be damned, Etta. I almost feel I'd be justified. I've had enough of Flair. But I'm still married to her and you know my reasons for hanging on."

The old dreadful sinking feeling gripped Etta's very heart.

"I understand. You're terribly good to her," she said.

"Once I've got rid of Tony we'll all pack it in and go home."

"But Flair said she'd go off with him if you send him away."

"She won't," said Mark grimly. "Flair has an eye to the main chance. She may behave like an idiot and kick up like a little mule, but she knows all about money, believe you me. She's well aware that Tony's legal affairs are in the melting pot and until he comes into his money he'll be a damned sight less able to pay Flair's bills than

I am — even with this legacy he's getting from his grandmother."

Etta turned away.

"Meanwhile *I've* got to say goodbye to you."

That hit him. He took her right hand and held it against his cheek.

"My *dear* one, I can't tell you what it'll mean to me if you leave Green Alders."

"I've *got* to, haven't I?" she asked wildly.

Before she could answer, Flair and Rodney walked into the salon. Rodney looked over his shoulder at Etta with that wicked glint in his eye that she so detested.

"What *do* you think, Mark," Flair cried. Her eyes were sparkling with malicious amusement. "I've just heard the news — you'll never guess what, Markie. Henry's been keeping a great big secret from us — naughty Henry! Do you know that Rod is the man she used to be engaged to? She all but married *him*. He was her boy-friend. She's just been pretending she didn't know him I'm sure she'll enjoy talking over old times now. They needn't gamble. They can dance. Rod says she's a super dancer."

Mark went white. For an instant he stared in silence at Rodney's smug handsome face. Then he said, "Etta can do as she wishes. And please stop organising us all, Flair. If Etta didn't want her private and personal affairs to be broadcast you had no right to mention the — engagement. I don't suppose either of them wished it."

"Oh, see here," Rod broke in, "I'm proud of the fact that Etta and I nearly got married. She's a honey. It just happened Claudia came along. It was Etta who didn't want you to be told. Not me."

Everybody looked at Etta. She was tongue-tied, scarlet with confusion, and furious with Rod. How absolutely damnable of him to have told Flair about their affair. He had promised not to spread the news. It made things so impossible.

She could see that everyone was waiting for her to speak. She avoided Mark. She dared not think what *he* was thinking. She said, "Don't let me keep you all. I do hope you'll have an amusing evening at Beaulieu. Good night."

Then she walked quickly away and closed the double doors of the salon behind her.

12

Etta spent a wretched night — feverish hours of tossing, turning, mainly thinking, trying not to remember Mark and the incredible influence he had upon her mind and heart — and body. Struggling with herself, trying to make a decision to leave Mark and Flair, no matter how much they begged her to stay.

She kept asking herself what Mark must think now that he knew that she had been so close to marrying Rodney Stone. It had been typical of Rod that he should have broken the promise not to mention their engagement, and even more typical of Flair that she should have broadcast the news and reduced it just to a shoddy little affair that must be concealed. It hadn't been like that at all. She would have liked to have told Mark about Rod. What must he think of the fact that she had kept it secret? Miserably she kept asking herself if he would misconstrue this, or, on the other hand, if he would respect and understand it.

It seemed a disaster to Etta, particularly as the facts had all come to light immediately after she had told Mark how much she loved him. And now every other unhappy thought seemed to crowd into her mind as she tried to face a future that seemed a hundred times more blank and miserable than the one she had anticipated when Rod left

her. She kept remembering that poem by Heine which so aptly and painfully described her tragic position:

He who loves for the first time
Even unhappily
He who loves for the first time
A god, a god, is he!

He who loves for the second time
And loves unhappily
If it be for the second time
A fool, a fool is he!

O sun and moon and stars laugh on,
For such a fool am I
Twice have I loved unhappily
Twice has love passed me by.

She used to scoff a little at the intensity of those words. She thought them over-sentimental and melodramatic. She remembered the translation had taken place during a German lesson. At school she had rather excelled at languages and enjoyed them.

Tonight the full poignancy of Heine's words hit her hard. She turned her hot tear-stained face to the pillow and kept beating her fists against it. '*Twice have I loved.*' '*Oh yes, yes, and what a fool am I.*'

Yet as the long difficult night dragged on leaving her still sleepless, she grew calmer. She even tried to laugh at herself.

Whose fault is it that you're so unhappy, and if you're a fool, isn't it due to your own folly? You ought to have learned your lesson with Rod. Oh, I know the two cases are different. Rod walked out on you. And you shouldn't have allowed yourself to fall in love with a married man, should you? If you feel your world is in pieces for the

second time why not try to pick them up and rebuild the little globe encircling you, Henrietta Hughes!

Then her overwrought mind was swept away again on the tide of her tremendous love for Mark. And once again her pillow case was wet with tears.

Soon after dawn she heard the party returning from Beaulieu. Heard Flair gaily talking to Rod, "Good night, Rod darling. Glad you enjoyed it. Sorry we shan't see you tomorrow."

Then Rod's reply, "I'm sorry, too, darling. It's been a wonderful night and we had a lot of luck, didn't we? I've got quite a bundle of francs to smuggle out. Claudia will be tickled to death."

More laughter — more 'darlings', more goodnights and goodbyes. Afterwards, silence.

Etta sat up in bed, her hands clenched, her face moist and hot and her eyes red with crying. She heard first the door of Flair's bedroom shut, then Mark's. He was so close, yet so far. She wanted him so much. Needed desperately to be held and comforted — to be told she need never say goodbye to him.

At last she fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion. She was so very tired. When she woke, it was to find Margherita putting a tray with coffee and croissants beside her bed, telling her that it was another glorious day. Etta looked at the clock. Ten o'clock. Good heavens how late she was! Margherita informed her that Madame was still asleep. Monsieur had had his breakfast and gone into Cannes and would not be back until lunch.

Etta drank her coffee. She didn't want the rolls. As she bathed and dressed she thought about Mark and came to the conclusion that he had gone to Cannes to see Cooks, and book seats for the return flight. He might even want to go home tomorrow. She was beginning to know him. Once he had made up his mind to something, nothing would alter it and he had made up his mind to take Flair

home. But if it came to a show-down and she refused to go, he might have to leave her behind. That would be awful, Etta thought. He would ask her to stay and look after Flair for the time being. Or would he? Would he have the same feeling of trust and confidence in her that he had before he knew about Rod? Despite all her efforts to keep cool, she felt frantically worried about the situation and anxious to see Mark again and make her explanations. After all she hadn't committed a crime in not telling him that she had been engaged to Rod. Thinking of Mark and Flair again, it looked very much like a break between them now, but much would, of course, depend on Anthony Durrance's behaviour.

A swift glance in her mirror showed Etta that she didn't look too good despite her tan. There were dark shadows under her eyes. She felt physically sick. This, she put down to nerves. She told herself that she must get on top of it quickly. It wouldn't do for her to become neurotic. She must keep calm and be practical.

Not long afterwards as she sat smoking her first cigarette of the day out on the terrace, Flair joined her. She wore a white bikini and had pushed her long fair hair up on her head under a turban of emerald towelling. She, too, looked a trifle under the weather, and extremely cross.

Etta began to say how glorious it was out here today and to suggest that Flair had a swim, then sunbathe before it got too hot, but Flair rudely interrupted her.

"Where's Mark?"

"In Cannes."

"Well, if he's trying to book me on a Caravelle or any other damned plane and force me back to Bourne End, he's making a mistake."

Etta's heart sank as it always did when Flair produced one of her black moods. She tried to side-track her.

"Didn't you enjoy your evening at the Casino, Flair?"

Flair shrugged. "Rod and I made a packet but I'm very upset. Tony's upset me."

Etta said sharply, "Why? What's he done?"

"He phoned me — woke me up — eight o'clock, to tell me quite coolly that he wasn't coming back to the villa today."

Etta's heart beat a trifle more quickly. "Do you mean he's had second thoughts? — "

"No, I don't," Flair broke in. Her voice and her eyes were sullen, and she flung herself into one of the long wicker-chairs like an exasperated child. "Of course it's nothing like that. Tony adores me, and you know damn well, Henry, whether you like it or not, he's the man I'm going to marry. The sooner the better. I'd almost decided to clear out with him but — "

"I don't understand — " Etta interrupted.

"Oh, it's just that he's like a lot of men — full of love for you when it suits them, and full of love for money when they're hard up. Tony's always had an eye on the fortune he expects and it seems he's got on the wrong side of Mama lately. In debt, too, and he had a conversation with Mama last night which ended in Tony having to promise to fly home at once for a conference with the solicitors, and sort things out."

Etta remained silent a moment. She didn't want to enquire how Tony's affairs were to be sorted out, but she did see that events had taken a new turn. Flair no longer wished Mark to go home and leave her down here — without Tony.

"So if Mark wants to leave Cap Ferrat, it's simple now," said Etta. "We all go back together. Is that it, Flair?"

Flair tweaked viciously at a piece of fringe on the cushion behind her head, and tore it.

"It isn't at all as simple as that, my dear Henry. I certainly don't want to stay in the villa if Tony's in

England. Neither do I want to go back with *Mark*. He's becoming an absolute tyrant and I won't stand for it."

Etta stared out at the sea. Calm, shining, tranquil on this perfect morning. How little tranquility there was up here in this sumptuous villa which had seemed so wonderful when they first came.

What an invidious position she found herself in! She was in love with this girl's husband. He had said that he loved her. And if she knew him and his sympathetic and understanding nature, he would surely not hold her engagement to Rod against her. But it looked as though it was going to fall to her to try and persuade Flair not to widen the breach between Mark and herself. Could anything be more ironic — *she* must try to send Flair back to *him*?

Flair launched into a tirade against Mark, mentioning all the times that he had upset her, denied her what she wanted, or argued with her. Forgetting to say one good word for him and quite forgetting to admit that she was at all responsible for his present attitude.

"I used to be fond of him but now I just find him beastly and impossible to live with," she declared.

Etta got up and turned her back on Flair.

"Oh, *really*!" she protested, her cheeks flaming, "you can't put all the blame on Mark — really you can't! When I first came to you, he was so much in love — marvellous to you all the time. Surely it's your fault if he's changed? Anyhow, you've owned up that you prefer Anthony Durrance. Although I think you're making a great mistake. You're throwing away a really wonderful man for one who, if you'll forgive me for saying so, has nothing but surface-charm and a title to offer you."

"Don't be horrid about Tony," snapped Flair. "He may not be your cup of tea but he's mine."

"That's true," said Etta in a low voice.

"And you've got a 'thing' about my husband, haven't you?"

Etta froze. She was not going to be led into a discussion about Mark. She did not want to be responsible even in the smallest degree for making this particular marital situation worse.

"Don't let's be idiotic about things," at length she said. But she had to press her nails into the palms of her clenched hands, totally aware that in this moment it was going to be quite impossible for her to go on living at Green Alders. She added quietly, "Is Tony not coming back here at all?"

"No, he said something about the family solicitors and his grandmother's trustees needing his signature and a whole lot of other nonsense I can't remember. But it seems necessary for Tony to go straight to Nice and get on the first plane possible. It sounds fantastically stupid but he says if he defies his mother he'll find his income halved. He asked me to take his big case back to England with ours. He took an overnight bag with him when he went off to his friends yesterday."

So, thought Etta, at least we shall be spared an unpleasant scene between Tony and Mark.

Now Flair's mood changed. She addressed Etta in a cajoling voice, "Darling Henry, I'm sorry if I've been nasty and spiteful. Come and sit down and let's have a coffee and talk. You're such a comfort to me. Tell me — do you suppose I ought to smother my feelings for Tony until his finances improve, and go on living with Mark for the time being?"

Reluctantly, Etta turned and sat down again beside the girl who held out a hand which she even more reluctantly took in one of hers. Somehow the physical contact with Flair repelled her. She kept thinking of Mark — Mark who didn't want Flair any more but would consider it his duty to look after her if she needed him.

Oh God, dear God, what a set-up! she thought wretchedly.

Flair told her to order Benno to bring coffee. When Etta returned to the terrace she found the girl even more amiable, and willing to co-operate.

"I've been thinking things over and I've decided that I *will* go back home with Mark. Actually my back hurts more than it did. I expect I have been beating it up too much down here — all these parties and late nights! I'd like to see that specialist in London again."

"You must tell Mark so," said Etta, and forbore to inform Flair that the moment they returned to Green Alders she, Etta, was leaving.

Then Flair said, "By the way, I've been so het-up about Tony and the change of his plans, I quite forgot about you and Rod. Why didn't you tell us you knew him so well, and why did you refuse to come out with us last night, you silly Henry? I think he's still a bit fond of you, you know."

"Do you mind if we don't talk about Rod?"

"Oh, why not? Now it's all out, don't be silly, darling. I think it's all rather exciting. Just fancy you and Rod almost getting married. I wonder what Claudia will say when she hears."

"I think she knows already. But I don't care what she thinks — or Rod, if it comes to that. We were engaged and he broke it off. Now he's married Claudia. That's the beginning and end of it."

"Oh, you are funny," Flair suddenly trilled with laughter. "You take life so seriously."

"Well, I can't say the same about you," flashed Etta.

"I don't believe in all these high principles you go in for, darling. I think you have a better time if you play around a bit. That's why I like Tony. We neither of us take life too seriously although — " she prattled on —

"he's *dead* serious about marrying me, and once he's got his money and I'm free, that will be *that*."

Pink in face, Etta suddenly turned on her. "How unscrupulous can you be? If Mark wants to try and make a go of it with you, why not meet him halfway? You just *can't* go on living with him and taking everything he gives and then, when it suits you — walk out with another man."

"You may think I can't — but it's what I intend to do," said Flair giggling. "Now, darling, don't let's waste this sunny morning. Why don't you get into a bikini and we'll have a swim."

"No thanks," said Etta hastily, feeling suddenly maddened by Flair's utter superficiality and disregard for her husband's feelings. "You go on down to the pool. I've got a letter I simply must write."

"Don't be cross, Henry." Flair had risen from her chaise-longue and now came up and touched Etta's cheek with her lips, "I can't be anything but myself, even if you don't like what I am. I've always told you I haven't got your nice nature. Mark thinks the world of you, you know."

There were limits to what Etta could stand. She turned and without a word walked out of sight and sound of Mark's wife. She had a job to do for as long as she was in the Trenders' employment. Flair's clothes needed looking over. Nothing was ever mended or pressed unless Etta saw to it. The drawers and cupboards were disgracefully untidy. So she busied herself in the big beautiful bedroom, screened now from the hot sun by venetian blinds. Her heart was heavy and her depression acute as she thought about Mark and the future. She hadn't even the heart to write to Marian and give her the latest news.

Just before midday she heard the car that Mark had been lent by the owner of the Villa Véronique, pull up at the front door. Her heart beats quickened, but her resolve not to let this second catastrophic love in her life upset

her as the first had done — ending in such bitterness and regret — helped her to pull herself together. She walked into the hall to meet Mark and find out what was happening.

She looked at him when they met in the hall. He was dressed in the sort of attire he wore down here in the hot weather — blue jeans, white cotton pullover, showing his tanned arms and muscular throat. Not for the first time her heart leapt at the sight of him. Tired and worried he might be but he didn't look it. This was the virile masculine man who had been a rowing hero at his university. Only the gaiety of his youth was missing. The dark handsome eyes were utterly sad. And she adored him.

As he looked down at her he passed a hand with a nervous gesture over his hair.

"Hullo!" he said in a low voice.

"Hullo!" she echoed the word, and realised that he must be feeling as she did — embarrassed and inadequate.

"Where's Flair?"

"She's been swimming. She's down there now, sunbathing."

"When is her boy-friend supposed to be coming back?" His voice sounded sarcastic, hard, unlike him.

She answered, "He isn't. He's asked Flair to take his luggage back to England as he's had to fly home unexpectedly. He didn't even have time to come over to Cap Ferrat. He went straight to Nice Airport."

"Oh!" Mark raised his brows. "And why?"

Etta explained the situation.

Mark said, "Let's go into the big room and talk for a moment."

"Would you like something cool to drink?"

"In a moment — I can wait."

She led the way into the salon where Benno had drawn the Venetian blinds. The light filtered through the

half-open slats, making a golden pattern on the polished floor. Otherwise, it was cool and dim in here.

Etta felt extraordinarly weak-kneed all of a sudden. She sat down on one of the sofas, pulling a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of the overall she had put on while she was tidying Flair's bedroom.

He lit the cigarette for her, then took one for himself. He seated himself beside her, leaning forward in a slightly hunched position.

"I've been anticipating a somewhat unpleasant talk with our friend the Baronet," he said, "but if he's gone of his own accord, so much the better. What were Flair's reactions?"

"She was annoyed but realises that it won't be much good to him if the family and his grandmother's trustees decide to make things financially difficult for him — which apparently they can."

Mark turned and looked at Etta with a faint derisive smile. "I told you. Money counts with my wife. It always has done."

"Well, isn't it just as well something's cropped up to get Tony away from her?"

"Does she intend to go on seeing him in England, do you know?"

"I imagine so." Etta frowned as she answered. Never before had Mark questioned her about his wife's activities. She felt hemmed in. She loved him and was on his side, but she must not betray any confidences that foolish girl had given her.

"The unpleasant discussion between Tony and myself has only been postponed," said Mark. "I do *not* intend to entertain him at Green Alders in future."

Then as he saw the little frown on Etta's usually smooth forehead and the slightly puzzled expression in the golden-green eyes, he added, "Oh, my dear, I assure you that I'm not just acting the grieved husband who fears he has

a serious rival. You know only too well that isn't the case. But as long as Flair stays with me as my wife I will not stand by and watch her wasting her life and, I might add, *my* money, entertaining a gigolo which is really what Tony Durrance is. Neither am I the complaisant type — and while Flair stays married to me, she must behave herself."

Etta stared at her cigarette end.

"I think I understand."

"And do you really think Flair *does* intend to stay with me, or might she suddenly walk out with Tony? It's rather what she hinted during that scene yesterday."

Etta shook her head. "Flair says a lot of things when she's in a temper, you know that. Anyhow, she can't burn her boats while Tony is tied up with his family and quite unwilling — which he is — to lose his inheritance. You've said, yourself, money counts with Flair."

"And you think she's willing to go home with me. I've got seats on the morning plane tomorrow, incidentally."

Etta bit her lip. Misery was beginning to fasten her down like a vice.

"I ought to feel relieved," he added. "I ought to act the long-suffering hero who wants to do the right thing whether his wife is worth it or not, and whether he still loves her or not."

"You've been far too long-suffering for far too long," began Etta in a passionate voice, then quickly retreated, "but no, I've no right to say things like that. My coming into your life hasn't helped and don't I know it! It's only made things more difficult for you."

He held her gaze intently as though trying to read into her very mind.

"I want to ask you something. I've been wanting to ever since Flair told me about you and Rodney Stone."

Here it comes, she thought, and her heart jerked in a

sick way. He's going to tell that he doesn't like or trust me any more.

But he did nothing of the sort. He said, "Why didn't you tell us that you were once engaged to Rodney?"

She put a hand up to her cheek in a nervous way and shook her head, "I — I don't know. It just all happened so suddenly — first his coming to Green Alders like that, then seeing him — without warning — sitting at the dinner table. It sort of hit me on the head. You know what I'm like, at least I think you do — I often find it difficult to express myself — to broadcast my feelings, and I suppose it was a question of pride, too. I couldn't bear you or Flair to know that I'd been — well — the old-fashioned word is *jilted*, isn't it?" she ended with a laugh that held little mirth.

"My dear," said Mark gently, "surely there's no need to use such a word, or to feel there's any disgrace in a broken engagement. You must have taken it very hard."

"I did," she said in a low voice. "I don't mind admitting I was very much in love with Rod. It was my first big affair. I was infatuated and I suppose rather stupid. I took it all too seriously."

He leaned forward, smoking his cigarette, staring at her. She looked so nervous, so upset, his heart was wrung for her.

"You have every right to take an engagement seriously," he said.

"But *he* didn't," said Etta. "I was crazy enough at the time to think that we were right for each other, but it gradually dawned on me that I couldn't have been more wrong."

"That's what I would have thought."

"But he can be charming — he was — and I fell for it," she said with a weak laugh.

"Well, you are much too good for him, if I may say so, and certainly not his type. I imagine Claudia is ideal."

"Yes," Etta nodded, "but you see the whole thing — my unhappiness after we broke up — then seeing them together that night, made me terribly confused. I just reached the conclusion that I had far better pretend our engagement had never happened, and say nothing to you or Flair about it. After all it might have made things awkward for you, too. Claudia was a friend of Flair's."

"Exactly, I understand. But you needn't have worried. Now that you've explained things, I'm glad."

"You won't hold it against me?" she asked with a sudden disarming smile, and that warmth that made her eyes so beautiful.

For a moment there was silence between them. When she on her part, saw the expression on his face, she felt as though she was suddenly electrified, caught up in a positive dazzle of feeling that was as wonderful as it was inexplicable.

Then suddenly he stood up pulled her from the sofa into his arms and kissed her lips with a desperate urgency that drove every sane or practical thought out of her mind. She relaxed completely in that feverish embrace, giving herself up to this mad and intoxicating passion. It could only be a moment's madness and she knew it. After the long bitter night of facing the end of her life's greatest happiness almost before it had begun, she needed this closeness to him, this assurance that he loved her in a way she had never imagined possible. In her mind now there was no doubt of the fierceness of their need for each other, and their complete unity even though it faced annihilation.

When Mark released her, he was white and breathless. He could only say, "Oh, Etta, beloved Etta — I love you so much I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to lose you," she whispered. Her own face was haggard. The radiance in her eyes had died. She stood staring before her blindly as though everything had fallen away and left her frozen and bereft.

"I feel I've loved you for a long time," he said.

"It's a sort of miracle, Mark. I don't say it was immediate with me as I was still being so stupid about Rod, but getting to know you showed me more than anything what a mistake I made. I know I suffered at the time but I'm really grateful to Rod for leaving me."

Mark pushed the hair back from her forehead and with his long sensitive fingers caressed her face and throat.

"You're so very lovely and so very dear to me. I'm kind of grateful to Rodney, too. I'd have hated to see you married to him, even if I can't have you for myself."

Now she seized his right arm and hid her face against it. "Don't say that. It sounds so final."

"Darling, I love you with all my heart and I know you love me. You can't deny it, but what the hell are we going to do?"

"I don't know," she whispered desolately.

"But I'm not sorry I've told you what I feel or that I've held you in my arms just for a few moments, Etta, my darling."

She lifted her face to his.

"Oh, Mark, I'm not sorry either. It's so glorious. I can't get over it, and this time for me it's for real, and for always. There's not a single doubt in my mind as to whether our love is mutual and absolute — something the other one never could have been."

He kissed her again, passionately.

"My love, my love," he whispered.

She pulled away, hiding her face in her hands, trying not to cry.

"I'm so happy — and so terribly miserable," she whispered.

Mark sought refuge for his own pain in a request for purely masculine comfort.

"For God's sake, darling, call Benno and ask him to bring me a Bourbon on ice. My American friend, Max,

tells me it has a very curative and helpful effect," he added with an effort at a smile.

Etta followed his cue. She laughed with him, her hands trembling as she tidied her ruffled hair.

"I could do with a drink myself."

"Order whatever you want, dearest."

She drew a long breath, looked at him and saw a pink smear on the corner of his mouth. She laughed shakily, and with her handkerchief wiped it away.

"My lipstick," she whispered.

"Hell," he said. "But I'd have liked to have kept it there."

"It would hardly be tactful."

As she turned to go in search of Benno, Mark caught her wrist and pulled her round to face him again.

"I love you with all my heart, Etta," he said, "I always shall. Whatever our future plans, please don't let us make them too definitely now — today — or tomorrow. It's all been too sudden and I'm sure you must feel as I do, that we're still in the centre of a sort of cyclone. I know we mustn't let it sweep us off our feet but can't we just let things settle. Later we'll decide what's best for all of us to do."

She was glad he said that, even if it was in a moment of weakness. Heroics were all very well and the principles of a lifetime couldn't be lightly shelved, but she — and Mark — were only human, and she felt as he obviously did, that the revelation of their overwhelming love for each other had been so sudden and unexpected, they were neither of them in a state to take hasty decisions.

It wasn't easy to see what Flair was going to do — or Tony Durrance. Etta, herself, felt the whole thing had become much too serious and complicated. She couldn't face up to it all. But she must accept the undeniable fact that Mark was Flair's husband, and the last thing she, Etta, must do was to help precipitate a divorce. Doing the

right thing and taking care of his silly, pretty wife, still meant a lot to Mark, and she knew it.

She spoke to him again, "As long as I remain part of your household, Mark, we've both got to try not to let what we feel sweep us off our feet."

He gave her a tender regretful smile.

"I like to hear you speak in the plural. I like to think it is not only I who have been swept off my feet, but you, too. And don't let's hear any more about you leaving us. I daresay it's inevitable but at the moment I just don't want to know."

She turned away. The hammering of her heart was reduced to a slower more painful rate.

"I'd better go and order your Bourbon and see if Flair's all right. She'll need some massage before she gets dressed."

He frowned. "You might mention that I'm back, and that we're booked to leave Cap Ferrat by air tomorrow."

"As you wish. I can get the packing all done quickly, and deal with Benno and Margherita. They're very efficient. They'll clean the place and prepare for Max's return."

"I suppose we could stay a few days longer," Mark sighed. "Perhaps I was rather precipitate in getting the tickets, but I thought Tony was still going to be here, and I couldn't take any more of him."

Suddenly Etta turned and looked at Mark, "We're supposed to be leaving the villa at the end of this week. It's only forty-eight hours in advance, and I have a feeling that you'd like to get back to the office, anyhow."

He gave another smile, his eyes adoring her. "How well you understand me."

"I'll see to Flair," she said, and walked out into the sunshine.

He called after her, "Tell her that I'm so hot and

sticky, I must have a quick bath. It was grim — that bumper-to-bumper drive to Cannes and back. She'll find me in my room if she wants me."

Etta was only gone a moment before he heard her voice, high-pitched and breathless, calling, "Mark, Mark! Come quickly for God's sake!"

He had just stripped off his shirt. He ran swiftly out on to the terrace, well aware that there was something — *something wrong with Flair* down there, in the swimming pool. He leapt down the steps two at a time. Through the haze of brilliant sunshine he saw Etta kneeling beside his wife. She turned her head as he reached them. She looked white and frightened.

"Mark — help me carry her in. Send for the doctor at once."

He, too, knelt down beside Flair. Her long fair hair was soaked but she must have been out of the pool a little time because the rest of her felt dry. He took her hands. They were very cold.

He looked up at Etta, "Good God, what happened?"

"I don't know. I found her like this. Perhaps she felt faint and just managed to pull herself up the steps, then lost consciousness. She isn't dead. She's breathing, but that's about all."

Mark lifted the unconscious girl up into his arms. He realised with a shock how thin and light she had grown lately. She had been burning the candle of her life away.

"Run like a hare, Etta," he said, "Phone for that doctor — the one we had for her when we first came. You'll find his name and number on the pad by my telephone. I think it's Dr. Le Mesurier. He's in Monte Carlo. He was the one Max recommended."

Etta began to run. She had been badly shaken by the sight of Flair lying there by the pool — so cold, so blue around the lips and nostrils. She really had at first thought

the girl had died. She raced up the marble stairs, calling for Margherita as she went.

"Quickly! Come quickly! Madame has fainted — she is ill. Get her bed ready — extra blankets — a hot water bottle — oh — *quickly*, Margherita!"

And this was the beginning of a nightmare which was to last for all of them into the late afternoon.

13

First there was the fruitless quest for a doctor. Le Mesurier was out on his rounds. Another doctor whom Benno knew was also out. None of the clinics Etta contacted would do more than give her names and telephone numbers of other local physicians, French, English and American. Not one was at home. As there had been no serious accident and Madame was simply unconscious, the clinics were not prepared to send an ambulance to the villa. After an hour Etta struck lucky — Le Mesurier had returned and received their message. His secretary said he was on his way.

Etta and Margherita had worked hard trying to revive Flair. They had some success. She opened her eyes — looked at them vacantly, moaned, but fainted again. Mark, shocked and like most men, not very good at coping with a situation like this, stood by her bedside sick with worry, watching and waiting. They had moistened her lips with brandy, but it was Etta's opinion that they should give her nothing else until the doctor came. Margherita hovered in the background, looking terrified. She continually crossed herself and muttered, "*Santa Maria!*" She thought Madame was in a bad way.

Mark watched. He was badly shaken It was inevitable that he should feel grave concern and even tenderness.

For this was still the wife whom once he had loved so much. He hated to see her lying there so white — so still — so helpless. The sight roused all that was kind and sympathetic in him. Etta could not do enough for her. She sat by the bed, holding one of Flair's cold little hands.

They discussed her condition — thankful at least that she was reviving. She opened and shut her eyes again and seemed to recognise them. They agreed that she had possibly had a heart-attack — it was certainly not out of the reckoning.

When at last Dr. Le Mesurier arrived, he asked that everybody should leave Flair's bedroom except Etta who could stay to give him what help he needed. By this time Flair's big eyes had opened and stayed open, and she began to cry.

"Oh, oh! Such a pain — it hurts — it hurts."

Le Mesurier sat by her side, his fingers on her wrist. He spoke in good English, "Keep calm, please, Madame, do not exert yourself. Just tell me where it hurts."

She pointed to her chest, then to her arm.

He said, "When did this happen? Do you remember getting out of the pool?"

Yes, she remembered, she said. She had felt dizzy in the water and climbed out just in time. She had felt a terrible pain then. She thought she was dying. Oh, it was terrible! By this time Flair had the doctor holding one hand and Etta the other. There was more colour in her face and she was beginning to enjoy her new tragic role. She told Le Mesurier about her arthritic spine — her fall from the horse — and how ill she had felt lately. She ended by saying, with a sidelong glance at Etta, "And I've been through so much trouble, Dr. Le Mesurier. I have an awful lot to put up with, if you but knew. I think it's all affected my heart."

Etta and the doctor exchanged glances. Etta betrayed nothing of what she felt, but Le Mesurier was a bit of a

psychologist and it did not take him long to analyse his patient. A most beautiful young woman and as neurotic as they make them, he reflected. On the other hand she was definitely ill at the moment. She had had a mild coronary thrombosis — of that he was certain. He suggested that she should be driven at once to his clinic in Monte Carlo where they could do a cardiogram, and she could stay there for a few days and be properly nursed.

"Perhaps you will tell Mr. Trender," began the doctor, but Flair interrupted with a little scream, "I won't go into hospital — I won't! Besides I oughtn't to be moved from here until I'm absolutely strong again. You can tell Mark that, please Etta." Flair added, "He can tear up his old air tickets, or if he wants to — go home alone. But you and I will stay here."

There followed an argument into which Mark was finally drawn. He was relieved to see Flair sitting up — propped up by pillows and well able to talk again. She was a long way from death, poor little thing, he thought. He couldn't help feeling sorry for her. The attack must have given her a fright. But his sympathies were soon withdrawn. As her strength returned she became as difficult and unco-operative as ever. She would *not* be taken to a clinic, she said. She was staying in the villa and Etta could look after her. If necessary Dr. Le Mesurier could send in a hospital nurse as well. Mark must tell Max she wanted to have the villa for at least another week.

Etta glanced at Mark. A little grimly he returned that questioning look. She thought how typical of Flair this all was. It would never enter her head to consider the expense her husband would be put to in a country where the franc was not at all in the English favour — nor did she worry because Max had already planned to return to his home after the weekend.

When Mark gently reminded her of this, she snapped at him.

"You can phone him. You know his New York number. Ask him to give us at least another week. I'm sure he will when he hears I've had a heart-attack. I'll be able to go home in another week's time, won't I, doctor?"

Le Mesurier wouldn't commit himself beyond saying, "I hope so." It was essential she should have absolute rest now he told her. If she did not improve she would be flown back to England on a stretcher.

Speaking to Mark alone, Le Mesurier repeated this threat. Mrs. Trender's heart-attack had not been serious. In fact her pulse, now, was very good, although he deplored the fact that he couldn't persuade Mrs. Trender to have the cardiogram. It was a pity. Mark refrained from telling Le Mesurier that a great many things were a pity where Flair was concerned, but he said that he felt sure that for her own sake she would consent to stay in bed at least for a few days. Miss Hughes, who was a splendid person, could look after her.

"Then it will not be necessary to send for a nurse," said Le Mesurier shutting his case, "Meanwhile I will leave some tablets for her. She must take them, and I will come and see her tomorrow. We will then think again."

Once Mark was alone with Flair he took one of her hands and pressed it gently between his own.

"You silly little thing, you gave us a bad fright, you know."

She wanted to pull the hand away but thought better of it. All kinds of ideas were crowding into her head. She was beginning to look upon this slight heart-attack as a not unmixed blessing. Mark would have to go back to the office, even if he cancelled his flight and stayed another forty-eight hours. She could then get Etta to telephone Tony and pile it on about her collapse and being still ill, and he would of course, come rushing down to Cap Ferrat,

which was exactly what she wanted. She couldn't wait to see Tony again — nor to be rid of Mark.

For the time being she decided that it would be best for her to play along with her husband who had always been so devoted and who also paid all her bills.

"Would you have been glad if I had died? You could have got rid of me then and I seem such a nuisance to you," she said, giving him a coquettish look which he found strangely unattractive.

"Don't be ridiculous. You've no right to suggest such a ghastly thing. How can I possibly want you to die? What I do want is for you to be as sensible as possible and carry out the doctor's orders. You haven't had a serious heart-attack but it *is* a warning, darling, and for God's sake don't ignore it, for your sake."

She grimaced at him, with a smile.

"As I told you once before, my motto has always been 'a short life and a merry one'."

He remained silent. She seemed as difficult to deal with as ever. And he was conscious, not only of his own inadequacy where she was concerned, but of a sense of guilt —because he loved Etta. It was Etta he would not want to leave when he flew back to England.

He forced himself to say a few of the flattering things Flair wanted to hear then begged her to get some sleep. Her nervous system must have suffered a shock. She ought to stop worrying and planning things, and just get fit again. Flair yawned and eyed him through her lashes.

"Tell Benno I'd like fruit. I'm feeling better, and he can bring me some brandy, too."

Mark brought her the drink. Everyone relaxed again, but for Etta and Mark dining alone, the atmosphere was strained. They were both weighed down with depression.

"You're going to stay here until the end of the week now?" she asked him.

"Yes. I must make sure she's all right."

"I'll feel better too, if you stay. But what more can we do for Flair if she won't go to the clinic? Isn't it all rather risky?"

"Le Mesurier doesn't seem worried. He will bring a heart specialist if he thinks it necessary."

"That's a good idea, but you know, I don't in fact feel there is anything seriously wrong with Flair."

He nodded. "I agree. She's right back to form telling me what she wants to do and what she won't do. She insists that I get through to Max and try to delay him coming home for a further week."

"That seems a bit much. Will he be willing, do you think?"

"Oh, possibly, Max is a millionaire and this is only one of his many pied-à-terres. I daresay he'll stay out in America a week longer or come back as far as Paris. If he thinks Flair's ill, he will certainly not want to turn her out."

They finished lunch. There was no sound now but the steady droning chirp of crickets and the faint swish of the sea against the rocks far below.

They looked suddenly into each other's eyes. Etta turned her gaze away quickly. She felt trapped. She didn't really want to stay here if he left. All the beauty and the glamour of Cap Ferrat could not make up for the tenseness of the situation that had arisen. She was afraid, too, that if she stayed much longer with Flair and had to witness more of her ingratitude — and stupidity — she would grow to dislike the girl thoroughly.

"Oh, Mark!" she said under her breath, "if only she didn't insist on me staying here with her. I don't want to. You know that. I don't know what to do."

He reached out a hand and touched her cheek.

"My darling, please stay and take care of her. She still relies on you. I understand entirely how you feel. I think

we both feel the same. I know I am *bouleversé*, as the French so aptly put it. It's completely unsettled us."

"We're both caught in a sort of snare," she whispered desolately and let her hand rest in one of his under the cover of the table. But it was only for a fraction of a second, and then they both sat back and had to be content with looking at each other.

Mark said suddenly: "It's really rather ridiculous. I'm behaving as though I'm an undergrad again — romantically, desperately in love."

"And I feel the same," she said and actually blushed at the warmth in his eyes.

"It's terrifying to think what mistakes we human beings can make. Once I loved Flair madly. But the girl I loved so has changed completely and I realise now it was not Flair but love that I loved."

"And I realised it was not Rod but love that I loved," she echoed.

He took her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"My darling, I think we're facing a pretty grim prospect. You know what happened in my own family and what makes me feel so determined not to desert Flair and break up our marriage, so you'll understand why I can't ask you to go away with me."

"Of course," she said, and her whole heart seemed to plunge. She could no longer sit there, facing him. As Benno came in with the coffee she got up, walked to the balustrade and leaned over. Her thoughts were utterly conflicting. She was tempted to tell Mark what she knew, to warn him that Flair was only biding her time before she, herself, broke up the home. Yet she knew she mustn't do it. She had given her word to Flair. She must keep it. Things would just have to work out by themselves. But oh, God, *supposing Tony walked out on Flair.* That was possible. They were two of a kind — money was more important to both of them than love. Neither one would

make a move unless they could be sure there would be enough money to buy all the fun they needed to extract from life. All that Flair had of her own was the little her father had left her. What would she do if Flair finally decided to stay with Mark? This seemed to her a very real possibility. The whole idea tore her emotions in two.

I must leave Green Alders as soon as I get Flair safely home, she thought. *I'll go back to Marian and the flat, and this time I'll find a job abroad. I'll work on the other side of the world where I'll never see Mark again. I can't bear to see him.*

Through a hot mist of tears she stared down into the golden pool. It sparkled in the moonlight. The lamps on the balustrade shed a golden glow over the purple bougainvillaea and the flower-beds below. The sea was the same glorious colour. She turned then to the lighthouse. The powerful warning beams, swinging from right and to left and back again, failed as usual to soothe her. She thought a little crazily, *I feel as though I am on the rocks, and that no lighthouse can save me now. Twice, twice have I loved unhappily, and oh, God, this second time it's killing me!*

She heard Mark's voice, calm and strong. Nothing would break him, she reflected, with a burning admiration for him. He would always be strong and do what was right.

"Etta," he called to her.

"Yes, Mark."

"Don't you want your coffee?"

She put her handkerchief up to her eyes for a moment and tried to curb her longing to burst into bitter sobs.

"In a moment — I'm watching something in the pool."

"Then if you'll excuse me, I'm going to take a walk. I feel I must get away for an hour. I need some exercise. It's so beautifully cool now."

"Yes, do that thing," she said brightly.

"See you!" he said.

All so ordinary. That was how he wanted it. And he wanted her to look on this newly-discovered love not as a crushing calamity but as something beautiful even though impossible. Something to be hidden like a treasure and never to be revealed. That was how it must be — while Flair needed him.

14

By another thirty-six hours Flair had made an extraordinary recovery. Typical of Flair, Mark and Etta agreed when they discussed it.

Her resilience was fantastic despite her seeming delicacy. A day and two nights' rest, and sedation, and she woke up looking almost herself again — with only a faint bluish shadow under the turquoise eyes to suggest that anything untoward had happened. Indeed, Etta had seen her look worse after an all-night session of gambling.

It was suggested that she did not get up today. Mark had to meet one of his staff who had flown down to Nice with some papers needing urgent signature. He would not be back until very much later. He also had to visit his friend Max's social secretary who was on holiday in Cannes while Max was abroad, and make all the arrangements for handing the Villa Véronique back to him at the end of next week. As he had expected, Max was quite willing to let them stay a further week at the villa. He was going to Nassau to visit friends; then back to the south of France.

"If I'm not home in time for dinner, have yours with Flair," Mark told Etta before he left. "There's so much to do, I may get held up and if so, you can ask Benno to put some sandwiches and drinks in the salon and I'll

have them when I want. I shan't need a big meal. I've got to have one in the middle of the day."

So the two girls dined alone — Benno having brought them in trays. A little consommé and creamed chicken for 'the invalid', and Etta, tired of rich food, was only too glad to have the same.

Her thoughts were entirely with Mark which she knew was not really to her credit, but she could not stop thinking about him and the intense flame of love — of need — that burned her up. But Flair's mind was on Tony. She talked almost incessantly about him during the meal.

Etta tried to concentrate on Mark's wife. She looked so youthful — so ravishing in one of the new pink chiffon negligées Mark had bought at her request from a famous shop in Monte Carlo.

"I can hardly believe that you and I'll have the villa to ourselves this time tomorrow," she said in a dreamy voice. "Mark says he must go. Something to do with one of his partners wanting to get away. You'd have thought he'd want to stay with me."

Now Etta spoke rather coolly, "Really, Flair, you don't want him. You prefer Anthony, you've just said so. You really rather covet *everything* in this life, don't you?"

Flair smiled, spread her arms out on either side and looked suddenly small and pathetic in the huge ornate bed. So angelic, Etta thought, how *could* anybody look like that and behave in such a soul-destroying fashion? If she lived with Flair a hundred years she would never understand her.

Flair said, "He's a funny old thing, my husband. He's still mad about me, isn't he, Henry?"

"Yes," said Etta steadily.

"A pity we're not more compatible — but you don't know how much I miss Tony. He's such fun and we share the same jokes. I'd give anything now to have him here with his guitar. Oh, and by the way, Henry darling, now's

my big chance. I'm feeling *so* much better and Mark's out for some time yet, do try and get through for me to Tony's home. Make it a personal call."

"Do wait till you're really better. You don't want to be upset — " began Etta.

Flair interrupted, "It won't upset me. It'll do me good. Now don't annoy me, Henry, please. I *did* nearly die, I'm sure I did, and I want Tony to know it. He'll come rushing down. He can make it the day after tomorrow after Mark's gone, and spend the last week with us. I wanted to speak to him yesterday only I didn't dare. Mark was mooning around all day and the doctor came twice. I never seemed to be alone to make a private call."

With all her heart Etta wished that she could tell Flair exactly what she thought of her utter disloyalty, and her ingratitude to Mark. But who am I to preach, she asked herself bitterly, when here I am pretending to be Flair's friend and knowing that Mark and I are in love with each other. But her conscience argued. You *are* Flair's friend and you do what you can for her and Mark does even more. He had no intention of betraying Flair as she meant to betray her husband.

"Please don't ask me to phone Tony," Etta broke out, "I don't want to be involved."

Flair immediately resorted to guile. She put on a look of abject misery and held out a hand

"Oh, Henry, be kind! Please don't lecture me tonight. I'm trying to be nice to Mark. You asked me to, and I *am* trying. That's why I've made up my face and got on a new nightie. I mean to be sweet to him when he gets back. But Tony is the man I really want. Let's face it. Etta, I've been through an awful time. I need a little comfort. Please, *please*, help me to speak to Tony. I'm okay but I don't feel well enough to put the call through myself what with all that shouting and repeating the numbers

and all those French voices squabbling and cutting you off. "Please, Henry, call Tony for me."

Etta had a brief fight with herself. To take part in this act of betrayal — even in so small a way — irked her terribly. She didn't want to be on Flair's side — yet she knew Flair so well — she would probably lose her temper, snatch the phone, find it difficult to get through and suffer for it physically. Dr. Le Mesurier had assured her that there wasn't likely to be a second heart attack Flair had made a quick recovery and with the help of the pills seemed normal enough now. One never knew with her though, and Etta felt that she must give in to Flair no matter what it cost.

So Etta put through a personal call to Sir Anthony Durrance, at his house, and Flair lay back on her pillows, smiling and victorious. The lines to London were not as congested as usual. The call came through within half an hour. Etta waited with Flair until she lifted the telephone, then when Etta saw the big blue eyes sparkle and heard her say, "Yes, put me through Oh, hullo, Tony. How *are* you my pet?", Etta walked out of the room and closed the door. She stood by her open window looking out at the stars, feeling indescribably unhappy. She returned to Flair's bedroom only when she heard the girl calling for her.

The moment Etta entered the bedroom, her spirits went down still further. Flair had lost her bright flush and was on the verge of tears.

"Oh, Henry, this is the *end*!" she said in a choked voice.

Etta sat down by the bed.

"Now what's happened?"

"Tony's playing me up. He pretends that he can't get away at once because of all the family discussions on trusts, and money and lawyers' meetings, and all that business. He's just making excuses!"

"Perhaps it's justified," began Etta.

Flair began to breathe heavily. "It isn't. I know Tony. He was just being awkward."

"You mean he's not coming back?"

"He wasn't going to until I told him that the doctor says my heart's in a very tricky condition and that any undue stress will *kill* me, and that I want him with me."

Now Etta felt nothing but anger and she did not conceal it.

"Really, Flair, that's not true. You know it isn't. Dr. Le Mesurier assured us all that you had a very light attack and that it was soon over. Just what he called a warning for you to go slow. But you are nowhere near dangerously ill. A few minutes ago you were a marvellous colour and as gay as a cricket. Why do you want to drag Tony down to Cap Ferrat if he's finding it awkward to get away? Besides, you must have scared him out of his wits."

Flair gave her a black look.

"I had to, otherwise he mightn't have come. And I *want* him with me just for a few days."

"Be reasonable, my dear. He'll see you back in England. It wasn't that he didn't want *you*, was it?"

"Maybe not. But I'm not going to have him giving me the brush-off," said Flair sulkily.

"So you're making him upset his family and the trustees, and he's flying over tomorrow?"

"Yes, he is. And Mark will be gone and perhaps I can enjoy myself again."

Etta stood up. A cold anger possessed her. She spoke sharply, "I don't like it. I don't think you should ask me to stay here with you. It's as good as forcing me to condone what you're doing to Mark — or what you intend to do, anyhow."

"Oh, I know you're on Mark's side! Don't tell me you

aren't," cried Flair, "I've told you before, you've got a *thing* about Mark. You don't mind what happens to me."

Etta clenched her hands.

"I don't deny I think very highly of Mark," she said, then was reduced to speechlessness.

The whole thing was getting beyond her, but she wasn't going to let this selfish and self-indulgent girl make *her* feel guilty. She had never intended to have 'a thing' about Flair's husband, and she never would have allowed her feelings to get the better of her if they had been a happy settled couple. This situation would not have arisen.

Suddenly she swung round to Flair. "This can't go on. I don't like being put in such a position. As soon as we get back to England, I'm packing it in. I must tell you I don't want to work for you any more, Flair."

As soon as she had made this announcement, she half regretted it. A genuine look of horror came over Flair's face.

"You can't mean that! You can't *want* to leave me and Mark. You've been such a success. Oh, Henry, you're so absolutely right for both of us. Oh, you *can't* walk out on me like this. I know I irritate you at times but we get on very well, really — oh, Henry, *please* don't go."

Etta felt forced to join battle.

"Don't forget *you* are the one who means to go, in any case. You've told me you intend to break up the marriage as soon as you can. So what does it matter to you whether I stay at Green Alders or not?"

"It *does* matter. Especially now I'm not well. So many things have been wrong with me. I honestly am not well, Henry. I know I've exaggerated it to Tony but my heart did almost stop beating in the pool, and if you leave me I'll just *die*!"

"Oh, Flair, you do so exaggerate!"

Flair burst into tears. She cried like the spoiled child she was, seeing something that she valued vanishing from

sight. In her way she had grown genuinely attached to this other girl who was so much stronger than herself — so dependable — and so kind. She had never come across anybody quite like Etta — a woman friend whom she could trust and admire and of whom she didn't feel in the slightest bit jealous. She flung herself on her pillows, sobbing.

"Please, Henry, stay with me at least till I've made my arrangements to go away with Tony. All sorts of things might happen — I couldn't bear a strange woman in your place. I *need* you. Mark needs you, too," Flair ended, and gave a sly look at Etta through her wet lashes. Etta was more than a little attached to Mark. Well, if she could make use of that — she *would*. She was going to be quite unscrupulous.

Etta found herself being tied up in knots. She hardly knew how to deal with anybody so difficult — so devious. Flair went on sobbing. She began to look so genuinely ill, Etta half feared another collapse. She certainly did not want to upset Flair like this tonight, anyhow. Whatever she felt about Mark she could see that this was not the time to leave Flair. Everything was in too much of a muddle — too unpredictable. Why force the issue? It might make things worse.

She said, "For goodness' sake, stop crying, Flair, I promise not to make any definite arrangements to leave once we get home. We'll just see what happens. But I can't swear I'll go on at Green Alders indefinitely."

That was enough to satisfy Flair. She immediately dried her tears, flung her arms around Etta and kissed her on both cheeks. Against Etta's will, she returned the kiss.

"You're like a damned spoilt kid," she muttered, annoyed with herself for being weak. Understanding, more than before, what a hold this strange little creature must have had over the man who had been crazy enough to marry her.

It ended in Flair asking for a brandy and soda, then offering Etta a drink which was firmly refused, and soon Flair had made her usual rapid recovery. After sipping her drink, she started to make plans for tomorrow. Once Mark had gone, Tony would arrive, and they'd put him up here in the villa. They would talk everything over thoroughly and see if there was a faint possibility that he might get hold of *some* of his money at once. Then he would be in a position to take her away.

Etta listened gloomily. She was too tired and depressed to start another argument. She ought to try to make the girl see what a ghastly mistake she was making. But it was hard — she would be ending her own chances of happiness if Flair took her advice. Tonight she felt there was little more she wanted to say to Flair, except to beg her to tell Mark that she had invited Tony, and that he was coming here. "You must see for yourself, that if you don't, you'll put me in a most invidious position and he'll never trust me again. You owe me this much, Flair."

Flair was now in the mood to be gay and laugh-off this show of principle from Henry.

"Darling Henry, you're so sweet, so *correct*. Okay, I'll phone Mark when he gets home and tell him that Tony heard about my heart-attack and has come rushing down."

Etta raised her eyes heavenwards, but said no more. As she heard Mark's car returning, she bent over the bed and whispered, "And not so much of this being just about to die, *please*. I can't take it. You're okay now. Give Mark a break, too. He's been very worried about you."

Flair grimaced. She had had a fright and given everybody else one, but nothing went deeply with her. She was utterly superficial and lived in and for the moment.

When Mark opened the door of Flair's room, he heard the two girls' voices, and Flair's laughter. He'd had a

busy tiring day, but had come back with the intention of being as tolerant and kind to his wife as he could. Scarcely however, in the mood for laughter or frothy chatter. He only hoped that such a good mood meant that Flair had really recovered. As for Etta — his darling wonderful Etta — he could only be grateful to her for the way she was helping Flair through this difficult period.

But Etta did not wait to see him. She slipped out through the terrace and around to her room that way — at the other side of the villa. She felt nervous and apprehensive and did not want to face Mark tonight. She must learn to control her feelings and she knew that it was up to her to help *him* control his.

He respected the fact that her door was shut when he left Flair later that night. Presuming that she might be asleep, he did not even call out as he passed her door. But when she heard his footsteps she began to tremble and hid her face hard against the pillow.

She loved him too much, with a love far more real and devastating than the one she had felt for Rodney Stone. It would be awful here tomorrow without him she thought miserably, and more awful still when Tony arrived and she had to be a silent witness of Flair's duplicity. She was beginning to dislike Flair — not even feel sorry for her any more. She couldn't wait to say goodbye to her. As for the situation with Mark, whatever happened it could bring no happiness to either of them.

Etta and Mark met for breakfast on the terrace as they had done every morning since they came here. Flair was never awake.

At half past eight, Benno brought *café et croissants* and the special Swiss cherry jam which Mark enjoyed. The awning had been pulled back. They sat, as they liked to, full in the sun. It was beautifully warm even at this early hour. Etta was going to miss the sun.

She smiled shyly at Mark and thought how tired and

drawn he looked. She noted his grey flannels, sports-jacket and tie — all ready for his flight back to Heathrow, she reflected dismally.

"I've ordered a car to take me to Nice in time to catch that ten o'clock plane," he said, "I'll just finish my coffee, then go and say goodbye to Flair "

She nodded and stirred her cup, feeling suddenly too choked to speak. He looked at the dark graceful head. He felt the pain of parting upon him, knowing also that the pain was shared by her.

"Oh, Etta," he whispered her name "My dear one, it's all very hard, isn't it?"

"Very," she answered without looking up.

"But for the moment it's got to be. We must accept that."

"Yes."

"You're a wonderful person I wish to God I could bring you more happiness."

Now she looked up and smiled through a haze of tears which, for all her strength of purpose, she was unable to control.

"You're quite wrong. Anyhow, they say one gets what one deserves."

"Nonsense. 'They' are wrong," he said trying to speak lightly.

"I hope you'll be all right and Marie Claire will look after you properly."

"Don't bother. After I've opened up the house and gone through the mail and got things back to scratch a bit, I'll probably stay at my club, at least until the night before you and Flair come home "

Etta drew the back of her hand across her eyes.

"I shall look forward to cooking you a meal a week today. That's when we've got our tickets, isn't it?"

"Yes. Flair should be okay by then She was looking marvellous last night."

Etta tried to speak but couldn't. With all her heart she longed to tell him the truth. To warn him that Tony Durrance was on his way here — due to arrive tomorrow. She felt so hideously disloyal — yet it was impossible for her to betray Flair, especially as there was always the chance that she might never go so far as to leave her husband. Etta had entertained just a small suspicion that Sir Anthony Durrance was not so much inclined to be the co-respondent in a divorce-case as Flair fondly imagined. She even wondered if he was as much in love or if it wasn't the good time that Flair gave him that had really fascinated him — as well as her physical attractions. And if he did manage to get some money from his trustees, if he would consider spending it all on Flair. So much was in the melting-pot. She would do her best to keep silence and at least let Mark go away today in peace.

"Take care of yourself, darling," he said, reached across the table, took her hand and pressed it very tightly. "Phone me some time — perhaps tomorrow night. I'll be at Green Alders for a couple of days. I'd like to hear from you how Flair's getting on."

Etta nodded. Things seemed to be getting worse. How would he take it if Flair carried out her promise to tell Mark that Tony was staying here? She felt sick. But Mark, usually sensitive to such things, was too worried today even to notice how white and strained Etta looked.

A few moments later, he got up. He must wake Flair and talk to her for a few moments, then drive to Nice.

"Oh, I wish I could come with you and see you off," Etta exclaimed, her whole face flushing with emotion.

"I wish you could," he said, and his dark melancholy eyes were full of love for her.

But they both knew that she couldn't go with him — that she *mustn't*. It was better they should say goodbye now. His last words to her must have been spoken a

thousand times by other troubled lovers, she thought sadly.

"*Don't worry too much. Something will turn up.*"

But after he had gone she wondered with passion and pain if anything *could* turn up that would make things better for either of them. She did not believe there would be a divorce and she must not want it — or be responsible for it in any way. It would be on her conscience for the rest of time if *she* was the one to come between husband and wife.

She went down to the pool for a quick swim and to try and freshen up and regain her control. Then she joined Flair.

She was surprised to find her in the bath. Flair was even singing. As she heard Etta, she called out gaily, "Hullo, Henry! It's another lovely day and I feel *absolutely* myself again! That nice Dr. Le Mesurier said I would, so long as I take one of his tablets every day and don't exert myself."

"Well, mind you don't," said Etta briefly, and started to tidy some of Flair's scattered clothes.

"Poor old Markie gone? Did he give you a nice kiss when he said goodbye to you?"

"No."

Etta stooped to pick up a pair of tights, conscious that her cheeks were burning.

"He was very sweet to me, really," said Flair. "I told him not to worry about my health and that he needn't expect to be made a widower."

"That's good," said Etta and had to bite hard at her lower lip. There was something about Flair this morning that infuriated her.

"I guess I'll lie out on the terrace and wait for darling Tony to turn up. I wish we could all go out tonight and celebrate."

Etta glared in the direction of the bathroom. "Celebrate what?"

"Darling, don't sound so cross Celebrate Tony and me being together again. We really do get on a treat you know, and Markie *can* be a bore."

"So you often say!"

Flair appeared at the bathroom door, her beautiful rosy naked body visible through a transparent robe She was unpinning her long golden hair. It rippled as she shook it back.

"You *are* a cross old thing today," she laughed, "I don't suppose you wanted Mark to go "

"Let's discuss what we mean to do tonight so that I can tell Margherita about the food," said Etta briefly. And now she faced the girl with the calm determination not to let Flair ruffle her.

"Let's have dinner here — the three of us," said Flair.

To which Etta immediately said, "I shall go out if you don't mind I'd like to take the bus into Cannes. As a matter of fact I had a letter this morning from a friend of mine who is staying up in Mougins She said she'd meet me with her car if I could get myself to Cannes. I'll phone her and fix it if you agree."

"Good idea, darling," said Flair happily. She glanced at her reflection in the long mirror, turning this way and that, and added, "My figure's still very good, isn't it, Henry?"

"Very. And why not? You're so young "

"And so are you, darling old Henry, but you never agree with me. You disapprove. I know you do." And she walked up to Etta and kissed her.

Etta removed herself from that perfumed embrace and marched to the door.

"Sorry, I'm a bit off colour — too much sun," she muttered, "I'll go and order the food. Anything you'd particularly like?"

"Tony adores quail. So do I. Tell Margherita to give us roast quail with muscat grapes for the main course, and she can make one of her gorgeous fish-pâtés as a starter."

At that moment the telephone bell rang.

"Take it for me, darling," said Flair, and sat down and started to pull on a pair of white jeans which she had decided to wear with her French red, white and blue striped cotton jersey. It was chic and just right for this weather.

Etta lifted the receiver. She listened a moment and then said, "Hold on, please." She turned to Flair. "A personal call for you, from Sir Anthony."

Flair changed colour and dropped the pullover.

"You mean he's at the airport already? He must have caught an earlier plane."

"No," said Etta. "The call is from London."

Flair went scarlet. Her eyes flashed. "Not possible. He must be on his way here. You've made a mistake."

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Silently Etta handed Flair the phone.

Etta was about to leave the room but Flair held up a hand and motioned her to sit down.

Etta could only stay as bidden, but her own face was hot. She wondered what had happened and if her suspicions about Tony's change of heart were justified. She could only imagine what Tony was saying by listening to Flair's replies.

"What do you *mean* that you're not coming? But you said you would . . . but you know I've had a heart-attack and nearly died . . . I don't care a damn whether your mother wants you to stay on until all the business is done. That's too bad, but *I* want you down here . . . Tony, you can't *say* that . . . it *isn't* more important than me, not if you love me . . . I don't call it love. You're just putting money in front of me . . . I never said you could do without money but you know I've got plenty if you need it. I can always get more. Mark will give me as much as I ask for within reason. I can say I'm set on a new fur coat from Paris."

That particular sentence made Etta grit her teeth. She stared at the floor, listening to more arguments. A real tirade from Flair. Little was left to Etta's imagination. It was quite obvious that Tony didn't want to come down

and didn't mean to. The result was inevitable hysteria from Flair who screamed down the receiver:

"You've got to come. You've *got to come*. My heart's worse this morning. I'll never speak to you again if you don't come. Never!"

A pause. Then Etta, feeling singularly uncomfortable and worried by the whole thing, heard Flair speak on a changed note, a low ominous one, "You don't mean that, do you? You're just being spiteful. We've *not* just had an affair. It's been for real. We suit each other perfectly. You've always told me so. You can't want to break it up. You *can't* . . ."

Another silence. Then Flair, looking so white that Etta began to feel more than troubled, held the telephone out to her.

"Henry, tell him, *tell him* how ill I am. Tell him that my heart won't stand another shock and that he's *got* to come down to Cap Ferrat."

Unwillingly Etta took the instrument, but with a hand over the microphone she said, "*Why* doesn't he really want to come, Flair?"

Flair beat one angry fist against the other. The easy tears began to gush down her cheeks. "Oh, it's all to do with this legal battle over his grandmother's will. I don't understand a word of it and I don't think he does. It's all an excuse anyhow, and he's let them get at him, that lot at home. They don't want him to carry on with our affair, and they've *got* at him. They made that excuse to get him back to England."

"Well, if he doesn't want to come, for God's sake don't try and force it," said Etta.

"If you don't tell him that he's got to come, then I'll, *I'll do something terrible*!" Flair hissed the words hysterically.

Etta spoke to Tony. "Sir Anthony, are you there?"

"Yes. Is that you, Henry?" came a rather sulky voice.

"Yes it is."

"Well, will you please make Flair see that my plans have changed and I can't fly down today. She isn't dying, that's obvious! I know her — she can put it all on. *You* know it, too."

"Flair had a genuine heart-attack after swimming, three days ago. She really isn't well yet," Etta said with conviction.

"That's right. And tell him I can feel my heart thumping and it'll kill me if he refuses to come," cut in Flair between sobs.

Etta repeated this message reluctantly. She then heard Tony say with some degree of concern, "Is that true? Does she mean it?"

Etta avoided answering this. She said, "After all, you did say you would come, and she has prepared for you and been looking forward to it."

"Well, I can't now and that's that."

"Tomorrow perhaps?" Etta was forced into saying this, urged on by signs and whisperings from Flair.

"Between you and me, Henry, I just don't want to come at all," came from Tony. "I don't suppose she told you, but we did have a few words while I was down in Cap Ferrat and that's one of the reasons why I flew off without collecting my luggage. I didn't want a showdown."

Etta looked nervously at Flair, who repeated in a low violent voice, "Tell him he has *got* to come."

Etta spread out a hand with a gesture of negation. Then Flair seized the telephone again.

"Tony, are you there? Tony. *Tony*!"

There was no reply, only a dead line. He had gone. Flair clawed at the receiver repeatedly, trying to get the exchange. Failing, she returned the instrument to Etta. Her tears had dried. She looked ghastly but there was an

ugly look in her eyes that Etta had never seen before. She looked absolutely venomous.

Wretched, wretched Flair, Etta thought. She was going to take this hard. It was going to hit her vanity, her belief in her own attractions, and her ability to keep whatever man she had on the end of her line. If one couldn't call it love, it was at least some kind of passion that Flair was capable of feeling for the man of the moment. And of course, she would be badly stung by rejection. It was quite obvious to Etta that Tony had told her all was over between them.

Flair shouted, "Get the exchange, Henry. *Call* him back. You've got to make him fly over. I'm going to make him do as I say."

"Flair, for God's sake, control yourself," said Etta speaking more sternly than she had ever done. "You can't force a man's hand like this. He doesn't believe that you are anywhere near dying, and, honestly, you know that you're not."

"But I soon might," said Flair through her teeth, "I just might and I'm not going to be fobbed off by Tony. He suggested we call it a day."

"He said that to me, Flair," said Etta frankly.

Flair called him an unmentionable name, then with her teeth still clenched, she said, "I'm going to force him down if it's only for an hour so that I can tell him what I think of him."

"Oh, Flair, how can you be so lacking in pride — and so stupid."

Now Flair burst into tears again. "I love Tony."

"I don't believe it."

"I don't care what you believe. I do love him and I want to marry him. We'd got it all arranged We were only waiting for him to get things settled at home."

"He has just changed his mind and decided not to break up your marriage."

Flair called him more names.

"A fine time for him to choose — when he's just heard that I nearly died three days ago."

Etta was growing tired of this death-threat. She sighed. "Please don't try and get him back."

"I intend to," stormed Flair.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, can't you think of Mark at all."

"No, I can't and I won't. I want Tony "

"Then you must be mad."

"All right, then I'm mad Put in a personal call to Tony."

Etta was being bulldozed To save further hysterical explosions, she managed after some time to get the exchange. First of all Tony's number was engaged, then the lines were choked, then Tony's home-number was said to be unobtainable, and when Flair fought this, she received the final blow to her efforts. She was told that the gentleman had said that he was accepting no more calls from the Continent.

The atmosphere in Flair's bedroom became tense. Etta looked anxiously at Mark's wife — the girl she had promised to take care of. Flair had thrown herself down on the big double-bed and hidden her face against the pillow. For a moment there was silence. Then Etta said gently, "Flair, my dear, please pull yourself together. You must try to accept this. Tony doesn't want to carry on with your affair. He said so — possibly his family have got at him. It's not difficult for those who control the money-bags, to get their way. Sir Anthony needs money. You've admitted that. He's heavily in debt "

Flair turned and looked at her, her beautiful face so distorted that it quite upset Etta, despite the fact that she despised the girl.

"I told him I'd finance him," she said hoarsely. "He knows that if Mark did divorce me, he wouldn't leave me

penniless. He said so, and I know Mark — he'd see I was all right."

"And that's the generous man you want to leave," said Etta in a low voice.

Now Flair said a strange thing, "Do you know, Etta, I'm not sure that it would hit him very hard. I'm beginning to wonder if *Mark* loves me like he used to."

Etta's throat felt suddenly dry. She turned away.

"If so — "

"I've only myself to blame," cut in Flair, "Yes — I know that's what you want to say."

"Isn't it true?"

"Maybe."

Now Etta did the hardest thing she had ever had to do in her life. It was against all her instincts — all that she wanted for herself. She said, "Don't you think you would be wise to give up the whole idea of trying to force Tony's hand, and make your peace with your husband?"

"Go on living with *Mark*? Be bored for the rest of my life?"

Etta clenched both hands behind her back, the points of her nails hurting the soft palms.

"That's what I mean."

A long silence. Etta thought, *dear God, is this what I ought to be saying? Is this what you want, Mark? Is she so helpless and hopeless that you would go on looking after her for the rest of your life? Do you want to preserve your marriage at any cost just because you have this thing against broken marriages and broken homes? Won't she break you in the long run?*

But there was no answer to any of those silent questions. And now Etta had to face an entirely new issue.

Flair was nothing if not obstinate, especially when thwarted. Suddenly she got on to her feet, walked to her dressing-table, pulled one of her heart-tablets out of the

bottle and swallowed it with a glass of the Evian water she kept beside her bed.

She turned to Etta, her eyes narrow and glittering.

"Henry, please phone Cook's and book two seats for us on tomorrow morning's flight."

Startled, Etta stared at her. "But for heavens sake, why? Mark's arranged for us to stay here another week."

"Which is what I wanted when I thought Tony was coming. Now he isn't, the sooner I get back to England the better. If you think I'm going to sit down and count him out just because of these stupid trustees you're wrong and so is he. And I can't tackle him from here. I must get home."

"For heaven's sake what for?"

"I'll get him back," said Flair. "Once I'm home I'll soon show Master Tony that he can't do this to me. And don't you argue or preach any more. I intend to have my own way this time."

Etta felt cold in spite of the warmth of the room, and the gold of the sun that gleamed through the Venetian blinds. She sighed.

"Both Mark and the doctor wanted you to have a week's complete rest."

"I can rest at Green Alders."

"But the flight — "

"I don't care if my heart stops halfway back to Heathrow. I'm going home where I can get at Tony. I swear I'll make him pay for cutting me off like he did on the phone just now."

Etta made a gesture of despair. She disapproved of everything that Flair was saying and doing, but she had no real control over the girl — certainly not when she was in this mood.

"How are you going to explain to Mark that you are going back so soon?"

"You can explain for me. You can ring him up this even-

ing and tell him I don't want to stay down here now he's gone. He'll be flattered."

Then Etta, feeling so cold that it was almost as though ice-water instead of blood was going through her veins, turned and walked towards the door.

Flair shouted after her, "No more arguments, remember. Change our air tickets, please Henry, and you can tell the servants that we're leaving."

The rest of that day was hardly a happy one for Etta. She felt as though she was being propelled along by the force of Flair's inexorable will. Flair wanted to follow Tony to London and nothing in heaven or on earth was going to stop her. Not for the first time, Etta marvelled that a person who looked as physically frail, petite and beautiful — and with all that childish grace and appeal, could become as granite-hard and unrelenting as Flair when things did not go her way.

Fortunately there was no trouble with the Italian couple. Etta imagined they were relieved to say goodbye to the difficult 'Madame', and Margherita looked forward to a few days' complete rest before the master of the villa returned. Benno was helpful with the luggage. Suitcases were carried to the young ladies' bedrooms. Polite and attentive as ever, Benno remained invaluable, but on Etta's shoulders fell the heaviest burden of the whole affair. She had a tussle with the Travel Agents about the tickets and only managed to secure the V.I.P. seats in an aircraft leaving for Heathrow on Monday morning, by explaining that one of the passengers was very ill and must return to London immediately. This, Flair fought against madly, but finally realised that she must wait another twenty-four hours.

Etta telephoned to Dr. Le Mesurier to ask if he thought Flair was fit to travel.

"After a coronary — even one so slight — I wouldn't advise it," he said.

Etta summoned up the courage to hand the receiver over to Flair. Le Mesurier tried to argue with her and failed.

Flair said, "It's absurd — I'm perfectly all right again . . . oh, quite myself again, believe me. I don't think it was a proper heart-attack — whatever you say . . . It was just a fainting fit, I feel sure. I'm fine now . . . No, I won't stay and rest. I can't. There are urgent reasons why I have got to get home at once . . . oh, for heaven's sake, give me some special pills for the journey . . . oh, all right, if it is a risk I'll take it . . . Thank you. I'll ask my friend to collect the tablets."

Then she turned triumphantly to Etta. "He's had to give in. He's giving me sedative pills for the journey and says if I don't do too much till we go, I'll probably be all right, because anyhow the cabins are pressurised. There shouldn't be any trouble with my heart."

When Etta sighed and suggested that Flair ought to let Mark decide, Flair laughed in her face.

"You must be joking. As if I'm going to ask him. He'll try to make me stay here and I won't. I shall tell him that I love him so madly I had to go back and rush into his arms."

That remark brought the red blood to Etta's cheeks. She turned on Flair.

"I don't know how you can tell such bare-faced lies."

Flair, who was at that moment changing into a bikini, preparing to sunbathe, gave one of her irritating giggles.

"Dear old Henry! You do get on your high horse whenever Mark's name crops up. Honestly, I wonder sometimes if you've fallen for him. Is he by any chance taking Rodney Stone's place in your affections, dear?"

The truth in this hit Etta so hard that she could only stare speechlessly at Flair for an instant, then walked out of the room.

It took her a little while to recover from that wicked

riposte. But whatever she felt about Flair's stupidity and deceit, she was beginning to find it hardly worth while to go on worrying. She had done her best for Flair — and for Mark. She could do no more.

Flair telephoned one or two of the local friends they had made while they were here, and told them about the incident in the pool and her imminent return home.

The Russian Princess who had been such a spectacular success at several of Flair's exotic parties, called personally. She brought her an exquisite bouquet of roses which she said Flair must take back to England. The American millionairess in the villa next to Villa Véronique came to bid Flair farewell, and to say how sad she was that Flair and her 'divine husband' were leaving Cap Ferrat.

Etta was forced to help Flair receive these guests and entertain them. A friend from Cannes — a divorcée who was reputed to be living with her latest admirer — came over to drinks, bringing her young boy-friend with her. Etta couldn't bear either of them — particularly the boy, Oliver, whom she called Olly. He wore a blue silk shirt with a wide yellow tie and his blond hair curled to his shoulders. He was Tony's type. The woman who brought him was twice his age. She was of Flair's genre. They sat sipping their well-iced cocktails, twittering, Etta thought, like a pair of humming-birds. One would have thought that Flair hadn't a care in the world. What a strange volatile creature she was, thought Etta.

The golden-haired Olly turned out to be an old friend of Tony's. Olly discussed him with Flair in rapturous terms.

"He's simply *great*! Have you heard him playing his guitar? *Super*! I did hope I'd find him here."

"He had to go back to town, but I'm joining him there on Monday and I'll tell him I've met you," said Flair, and gave Etta a side-long mischievous look which did nothing to reassure her that things were going to turn out well for poor Mark.

She was thankful when the guests departed and Flair consented to go to bed.

"But don't fuss over me," she told Etta. "You know how I love parties and people. Make sure I don't forget to take the Princess's roses. Just *look* at the long gorgeous stems! They have such marvellous flowers in this place. Now stop looking gloomy, Henry darling, and let's have our supper on trays in here. You can bring in the portable television. The programmes are pretty grim, but it'll be better than nothing. Then I promise to go to bed."

Etta thought it would be best if she did not argue with Flair, but she winced when Flair started to remind her of all the 'sweet things' Olly had said about Tony. Flair agreed with them all. Tony was not only a great guitarist, but the most exhilarating person (to her) in the world. By hook or by crook she'd find money and bring Tony back into her life even if she couldn't afford to leave home for him just at the moment. But she'd go on seeing him behind Mark's back.

"And that's that!" she ended.

It was on the tip of Etta's tongue to tell Flair *that* was not *that* as far as she was concerned. She intended to leave Green Alders as soon as they got back. It would be utterly impossible for her to stay any longer.

Etta drove to Dr. Le Mesurier's surgery for Flair's pills, then, by his instructions, gave her a sleeping powder and retired to her own room. She felt utterly exhausted. She had been on her feet all day and it had been really hot. The weather was not good in England apparently, but she had really had enough of this humidity. It made her head ache She would be pleased to be back in her quiet charming bedroom at Green Alders. Pleased to see *him*. Oh, God, yes, even if it couldn't be for long. Then back to the flat and dear Marian's company.

For a long time Etta lay sleepless. Miserably she watched the revolving lights from the lighthouse. They swivelled

around, first drenching her room with a shaft of white brilliance — then quickly turning away leaving her in total darkness.

She had an awful feeling tonight that the darkness had come to stay and that for her the light was going out altogether.

16

On the front page of the evening papers that following Monday, a notice attracted the attention of most of the people who knew Mark and Flair Trender. In particular, it caught the gaze of Sir Anthony Durrance who had just bought a paper for the express purpose of finding out whether the horse he had backed that afternoon, had been placed. His depleted finances wanted replenishing, and he had made a pretty heavy bet. He needed a win.

He had been feeling fairly pleased with life just before he bought that paper because his mother, relieved that Tony had consented to stay away from the woman who had recently been taking up all his time, was taking him on a trip to South America. Tony had gradually decided to get on his mother's right side and the holiday wouldn't be bad Mama would pay all expenses and Tony had never seen that part of the world. He was particularly interested in the music out there. He had already secured for himself a personal introduction to one of the greatest guitarists in Rio de Janeiro.

Tony stopped outside the shop, cigarette in the corner of his mouth, transfixed by the paragraph on the front page:

Wife of well-known British stockbroker dies in mid-air, flying from Nice to Heathrow.

It went on to say that Mrs. Mark Trender, accompanied by a Miss Henrietta Hughes, were passengers on the aircraft which had left Nice that morning. The weather conditions were good but as the plane approached Paris, Miss Hughes called a stewardess because Mrs. Trender seemed to be breathing with difficulty. In spite of oxygen which was immediately applied, Mrs. Trender's condition worsened and she collapsed. The pilot made a forced landing at Orly where Mrs. Trender was taken to hospital, but it was found on arrival that she had died Mrs Trender was only in her early twenties and a well-known beauty. The Trenders lived near Bourne End.

Tony stood rooted to the spot There wasn't much colour left in his face as he raised the cigarette to his lips. His hands were shaking.

"*God!*" he said under his breath.

Flair was dead. Little Flair with all her beauty and gaiety and bubbling fun. She had been too possessive and exigent at times but they had had some great times together. *Great times!* He had been mad about her for a long stretch. Impossible to think of her lying dead. What a shocking affair and what a ghastly experience for that nice housekeeper whom she playfully called 'Henry'. Tony had rather admired Henrietta Hughes.

Flair had seemed okay when she phoned him. But no, he remembered now that she said she had had a heart-attack after a swim. God! she must have been mad to fly home. And now Tony's thoughts turned to Mark Trender. Poor old Mark, whom he had often labelled Untrendy Trender. He knew Mark was a very good fellow and all that, but just not Tony's type — not Flair's either.

Tony walked back to his house, dragging his footsteps, and feeling slightly sick It was not that he was in love with Flair any more. He had been fed up with her lately. Lack of cash of course was the trouble. He might have gone off with her if he had had control of his grandmothers'

money. And Tony had thought it best not to carry on any longer with his affair with Mrs. Trender. But since his argument with her on the phone, he had actually played with the idea of meeting her now and again. She was very amusing, as well as gorgeous to look at. Now it was all too late. She wasn't alive any more. What a terrible, *terrible* thing! He regretted their quarrel. He was really very upset. Of course he'd have to sit down and write a letter of sympathy to Mark. Yes, he must do that.

Tony delayed his return home and turned into the local pub. He needed a strong drink.

17

One wild wet October day — about a month after Flair's death — Etta sat in front of a log fire in the drawing room at Green Alders with her friend, Marian.

It was pleasant in the beautiful well-warmed room. But a sad change had come over the garden, Etta thought, since the day she first came down here. The trees had turned yellow and red — some of them already brown. There were piles of leaves, blown by the wind, lying on the lawn. The river was half-blotted out by a thick mist this afternoon, and the sky was full of heavy cloud It was already so dark at four o'clock that Etta had to switch on the lamps to dispel the gloom.

They had just finished an early tea. Marian had come down for the day, but wanted to get back to London for dinner. She had a date and it was one that Etta wanted her to keep.

To Etta's delight, the chubby jolly Marian had at last met what appeared to be the right man for her. Nothing glamorous about Jack Williams. He was almost as plump and short as Marian, but a delightful person — a widower in his late thirties whom Etta felt sure would make Marian just the right sort of husband.

"He's marrying me because I'm a trained cook, and that's about it," Marian had laughingly informed Etta

when she first told her about Jack. But behind that jocular description Etta soon learned that Marian was for the first time deeply in love. Jack's first wife had died three years ago. He was still young and successful — with a partnership in a firm of insurance brokers. Their first meeting had been at one of the conference lunches in the City where Marian had done the catering. It had been love at first sight.

Etta had hoped that Marian would stay with her tonight, but she was driving up to Bedford tomorrow with Jack, to see his mother.

"She's a better cook than all of us, according to Jack," Marian had told Etta, "but once Jack and I are married, we intend to diet. We both need to take off a few pounds. As for you, my poppet, it's time *you* put on a few."

"Oh, I'm all right," was Etta's reply.

But she wasn't and Marian knew it. Etta had not yet recovered from the shock of Flair Trender's death.

As Marian sat with her, eating the delicious lemon sponge cake Etta had made for her, Marian thought what a lot of bad luck Etta had had this last year. First the trouble over that wretched man, Rodney Stone, now this. Marian knew, of course, that Etta was deeply involved with Mark Trender, and life today was offering no easy solution to the problems that surrounded them.

Mark had been up in Scotland for a week and was due back early this morning. He had been invited to shoot pheasant with a friend who was at university with him. He had gone because he knew that his own nerves were in shreds, and he badly needed a change. His concentration had been affected by all that he had gone through recently. The senior partner in his firm had insisted he should take a fortnight away from the City after Flair's tragic death.

As the autumn day lengthened and it grew dark, Etta got up and pulled the curtains. Then she turned back to pour herself and her friend another cup of tea. Marian

looked at her. She looked shockingly ill, Marian thought. This disaster had affected her far worse than the break with Rod. A certain delicacy of feeling naturally forbade Marian even suggesting that now Mark Trender was a free man things might look brighter for Etta. So far Etta had not discussed it or touched on even a remote possibility of finding happiness in the future.

When she first returned from Paris, she had been on the verge of a nervous breakdown, but managed by sheer strength of will and what Marian called her 'guts', to get on top of things and face up to them.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Etta directed the conversation to herself. As a rule she shied away from it. She said, "I've got to think a bit about what I shall do when Green Alders is sold, haven't I, Marian? It's a bit dicey."

"Well, I haven't pried into your affairs, lovey, but I wish you would open up a bit. All you've told me so far is that Mark's putting the house up for sale and that he lives in his Club, and that you're down here with Marie-Claire, meanwhile, settling up."

"That's so. It's the least I can do for him."

"What more *could* you do, darling?"

A shadow crossed Etta's face. She stared blindly out into the darkness, no longer able to see the river or even the shape of the trees.

She felt that she had altered completely since that terrible episode in the plane. It had been a shattering experience. At the time she had stood up to it and been personally thanked by the captain, the air stewardess and the doctor who met the plane at Orly, for her cool and sensible handling of the situation. But after it was all over she had felt herself sinking into a kind of apathy — a depression unlike anything she had ever known. It had frightened her. She had always believed that a person could rise above misfortune and still retain a sense of humour. But for the moment any humour that she

had ever possessed no longer seemed to exist. Most of all, she was concerned with Mark and their feeling for each other.

She was the one who had borne the brunt of Flair's actual collapse on that terrible day when they flew from Nice. She had not been totally blind to the possibility of danger when they set out. In spite of anything Dr. Le Mesurier had said and Flair's own stubborn refusal to listen to common sense, Etta had been anxious. More particularly when Flair actually started to complain in the car, as they drove to Nice, that she had a pain in her chest. But when Etta begged her to turn back, or to see a doctor at the airport before she went on board, she refused. It was only indigestion — probably that rich pâté she had for supper the night before. She was not going to lose any more time.

Etta, of course, had been a little afraid the girl might be taken ill during the flight, but never for a moment did she suspect a second coronary. The doctor had been wrong, but Etta knew that a correct prognosis in heart conditions was not always possible. She could not blame anybody. Whenever she or her friend had touched on the gloomy subject of death, Etta had always expressed her firm belief in fate. When your hour came — it just came and nothing could prevent it. So nothing could have saved poor little Flair.

Even now, weeks later, Etta tried not to remember the moment that pretty silly head with the long golden hair fell against her shoulder and the Princess's pink roses which she had brought with her, had slid on to the floor — and her last sudden gasp of breath as they lifted her into the ambulance at Orly. Her heart had not actually stopped beating till then.

What had followed had been a nightmare. Driving with the body in the ambulance to the Paris hospital. Telephoning Mark's office, trying to break the news to him gently,

but failing — then having to give him an honest answer when he asked, "Do you mean that Flair is dead?" And Etta had had to say, "Oh, Mark, *yes*!"

After that, a hastily found hotel. There she had waited, stunned, for Mark to join her.

It had been an awful moment when they finally stood facing each other — two shocked almost inarticulate people. He had just taken her right hand, put it against his cheek, dropped it again, and said, "Thank you for all you've done."

And after that she had burst into tears, and he had broken down and wept with her, put an arm around her shoulders and tried to comfort her, but she had quickly recovered. So, together they had faced the inquest and all the endless difficulties that confronted Mark before he could get his wife's body transferred to London.

For a long time now Etta had tried to blot out the thought of those grim days that followed But once Mark, with the help of an old friend in the Embassy had arranged for Flair to be flown back to her own country, things were a little less grim.

Up to the day of the cremation Etta had been kept busy with many things. Mark was inundated with the legal procedure — with facing up to the press — trying to avoid interviews, and all the unwanted publicity — then the letters of sympathy that poured in from the Trenders' many friends.

Mark did not stay down at Green Alders He left Etta there with Marie-Claire. He stayed in his Club. But he had to spend much of his time with Etta, who acted as his secretary as well as his housekeeper during that period, and who was efficient and sensible about the whole unhappy affair. The telephone rang repeatedly. Etta had to speak to many callers who had been friends of Flair's or Mark's — or both. They knew Etta and were pleased to talk to her, but there were, of course, some who were out

only to try and extract dramatic details of Flair's death. These, Etta dealt with somewhat briefly.

There came a telephone call from Anthony Durrance on the evening before the funeral. Mark was at home. As soon as he recognised Tony's voice, he handed the receiver over to Etta.

"Please deal with this," he said brusquely.

Etta then spoke to Tony. He started to express his great sorrow and horror at Flair's death. He would like to see Mark. And this was where Etta with some of her old spirit, made mincemeat of him and told him he wouldn't be welcome if he came. He whined down the telephone.

"But I'm so shattered. I'm so afraid it might all have been my fault. I ought to have gone down to see her when she sent for me . . . Oh, — Henry — "

"Don't call me that," Etta had said between her teeth, "and it's Mark's wish that you do not come to the funeral." Then she put down the receiver.

White and shaken, she had continued to take notes from Mark about the sale of the contents of Green Alders. He wanted to keep only personal things — pictures, books, etc. The rest he wished sold. He would never live in Green Alders again.

On this sad autumnal evening, Etta and her friend finished their tea and smoked their cigarettes and Marian brought up the subject of Etta's movements.

"How long do you think you'll stay down here, darling?"

Etta sighed and was silent for a moment. The longer she was here, the more she wanted to get away. The house which had once been so beautiful and attractive, seemed full of ghosts and every room she entered, she felt that she was pursued by that one pathetic hapless little ghost — Flair. Flair in good mood, giggling like a schoolgirl — Flair, gay and brilliantly pretty, coquetting with the men who came to her parties. And Flair at her worst —

screaming, hysterical, unmanageable, fighting against Mark, all her beauty hidden by the hateful mask which destroyed everybody's sympathy, and peace.

Would she ever forget her? *Would Mark forget?* — Therein lay a host of doubts and fears for Etta. Flair's ghost seemed to haunt both of them, persistently. The future was bleak.

He hardly spoke of her now. Only when it was necessary. He had grown older and sterner, somehow. Etta, who loved him so profoundly, really did not know whether his memories of his wife were sweet — or bitter — or a bit of both.

Marie-Clair continued to come to the house and to carry out her duties as before. She and Etta worked together — sorted linen, packed all the clothes in Flair's cupboards, and made innumerable lists for Mark. Etta could see at these times that the Swiss woman was never far from tears. She kept murmuring, "*Pauvre petite Madame*". She knew as they all did at Green Alders — just what a nightmare Madame had once made of life for her husband. But sudden death often brings about a reversal of feeling in those who are left. Sins could be forgiven, virtues are extolled and exaggerated.

Mrs Box, also arrived daily to carry on with her cleaning But even she paused now and then to sniff and wipe her eyes and talk to Etta about the "poor little soul". Etta had to listen patiently to reminiscences of Flair. But she drew the line when Mrs. Box, one morning, started to tell her that Sirikit, her Siamese, had a sixth sense and *knew* something had happened to Mrs. Trender. Sirikit only went once into Flair's beautiful bed-room (now cold and sheeted) — dashed out, mewing pitifully, and refused to go back into it.

"She *knew*. Oh, I think cats are like humans!" Mrs. Box informed Etta, who merely nodded and hastily drew the woman's attention to the fact that some possible buyers

were coming over the house tomorrow and she wanted the dust-sheets removed from all the rooms.

"I'll be glad really when I *can* say goodbye to Green Alders," Etta told Marian. "It gives me the shivers."

"Is Mark asking a fabulous price for the property?"

"He's leaving that to the house-agents. They expect a huge price, it being such a beautiful place and right on the river. They think it will go quickly."

"What will Mark do then?"

"I don't know," Etta said in a low voice.

"He's coming down this evening, isn't he?"

"Yes. I'm cooking him a small meal."

"Will he stay?"

Etta turned away.

"No, he never does."

Marian drew her own conclusions from this. She was quick to note the colour in Etta's face, and to guess what the situation was between these two. They were in love, of course. They had found that out long before Flair died. Marian knew that much. But they were not going to do anything about it yet. That would be in keeping with the character of both of them. Marian knew her Etta. She had also met Mark once or twice since the tragedy and thought him a very worth-while man, as well as an attractive one. A great improvement on Rodney Stone in Marian's estimation.

She only hoped that in time Etta would find happiness with Mark. But for the moment, Etta was being rather mysteriously quiet and uncommunicative about her personal affairs.

Later, after Marian had gone back to town Etta went into her kitchen — a place which no longer saw so much of her these days — and started to prepare a mixed grill for Mark. She was sure he would appreciate a decent meal — he had been looking so hollow-eyed lately. After dinner, he wanted to discuss what was to be done with

Flair's personal possessions. He proposed, she knew, to send the two most valuable Italian paintings that her father had given her, up to Christies. Flair had only one close relative alive, and that was a married cousin who lived in America. She had a small daughter who had been Flair's godchild, — christened 'Flair' after her. Mark intended to send her several pieces of her godmother's jewellery. There were many things to be sorted out and discussed. It wouldn't be a happy evening.

As Etta scraped the potatoes, she thought seriously about Mark. What would he do in the future, Marian had asked. What indeed! Etta, honestly, had not a notion. He deliberately avoided talking about anything at all emotional. He kept strictly to business. They had been on purely platonic terms during these last four difficult weeks. He made no allusions to the passionate feelings they had expressed for each other in Cap Ferrat. He had been kind, charming, thoughtful, all the things she adored in him, but not once had he touched or kissed her since that moment in the Paris hotel when she had wept in his arms.

There were dark moments when Etta had begun to wonder even if he regretted what had happened at Villa Véronique. Then she sank into yet darker depression. But her feelings were on the whole so confused, she could not analyse them so she took her cue from him and avoided (as he did) anything of a sentimental approach when they were together.

However, this evening when he arrived, Etta was given no time to tell Mark that he looked tired and was not taking care of himself. After taking off the short tweed coat that he wore this rough autumn night, he came close to her and ran a critical gaze over the pale oval of her face, and the sweetly familiar sight of the slim figure in the white overall. He had a swift rather sad vision of her as she used to look in Cap Ferrat, with her dark silky hair

flowing down to her shoulders, and those fine intelligent eyes — more green than gold — sparkling with health.

He said, "Hey! where's that lovely colour you had in the south of France? You look drained — exhausted tonight, Etta. Are you doing too much?"

"Not in the least. I'm being thoroughly spoilt — Marie-Claire waits on me, and we go to bed early every night."

"But all this sorting and packing up has tired you."

"Nonsense," Etta smiled blandly, and turned away from him, anxious that he shouldn't see that sudden colour in her cheeks. She refused to be coddled, she added, and would he please excuse her and enjoy his drink while she dished up the dinner. Marie-Claire was out with friends but would be back later on to clear up.

"Then you've got to do the meal alone?"

Now she shook her head at him and laughed.

"Mark, *really*! As if I need help and only two of us at the table. This sort of thing has got to stop. It's too much like over-gracious living for me, and quite unnecessary. Marie-Claire wanted so badly to go out with some friends. I had to let her go. I suppose you'll be giving her notice soon, won't you?"

"I suppose so," he said.

It wasn't until they had finished dinner and Etta had cleared away and taken coffee into the drawing room that Mark again referred to the fast-approaching day when they would close Green Alders down altogether.

They sat together on one of the blue velvet sofas. To Etta, the Chinese room seemed as exotic and fascinating as ever in the golden glow that spilled from the candle wall-lights. Outside the weather had worsened. A wild wind was blowing and rain spattered against the window-panes. Etta finished her coffee and knelt a moment by the fire-place to stir the logs into a brighter blaze.

"You said you wanted to go over some lists of all the

treasures I've collected in the house. You can decide what you're going to do with them."

"I rather dread it," he said in a low voice. "It's a painful business."

"I feel it's painful, too."

"You would. You're a very sensitive person and God knows you've been a most wonderful help to me. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

Now she came and sat beside him again. For a moment, she emerged from the shell of reticence.

"I've wanted to do all I can for you," she said.

He found the expression in her eyes rather too dangerously sweet.

"Etta," he said, "I haven't talked much to you about Flair so far. I expect you've realised how shattering the whole thing has been to me."

She nodded.

"So I've never asked you exactly what the position was between her and Tony Durrance before she died. I only guessed that she meant to leave me in time and go to him. And I have an idea you *knew*."

"Yes. Much against my will I was forced to listen to some of her confidences. I did try to talk some sense into her but I failed."

"So did I," said Mark with a short laugh and pulled a cigarette from a packet that lay on the table. "I failed completely."

"She wasn't easy, and she was very misguided," said Etta. "Poor Flair."

"Poor Flair," he echoed. "She had so many good qualities. But don't let's pull her or the past, to pieces. I'd like to remember her as she was when I first met her. I loved her then, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"She *did* mean to leave me, didn't she, Etta?"

"Is it any use me telling you about it?"

"It might make things easier for me. While I thought she was wholly mine and just a silly crazy child that I could turn into a decent sort of wife, I was willing to put up with the disappointments and difficulties. But you're right, Etta, it's useless digging up past facts and scattering the bits around. Better to collect them and give them a decent burial — with her. Poor Flair!" he added again.

Etta remained silent. What about '*Poor Mark*' she thought. He never had considered himself. And she could see how even now he was trying hard to exonerate Flair and blame himself for all that had happened.

"It's odd when you come to think of it," he said. "Her following that frightful fellow back to England. It killed her. He wasn't worth it."

Etta held her hand out to him.

"Please Mark — darling Mark — don't torture yourself with all these thoughts. I quite understand you must feel very bitter and mixed up and it's all been a frightful shock, but do try to forget it and make something good out of life for yourself. *Please* try."

He laid down his cigarette, took her offered hand and held it against his cheek for a second. His eyes looked down into hers with that melting tenderness which she found so irresistible.

"You're terribly nice to me, Etta. Quite apart from what you have done in the practical sense since Flair died, you've been such a tower of strength to me personally. You have a genius, darling, for propping up the weak."

"But you've never been weak — never!" she said indignantly.

"Ah, but you haven't realised how much I wanted to let myself go," he said. "We've been busy in the City this last week or two. I've worked myself to a standstill. There's been so much legal stuff — long drawn out, like all such dealings with solicitors. I've actually felt so tired I've not had the vitality left to think about reshaping my

life. But if I *have* thought about it, I assure you, *you* alone have seemed the pivot of my existence."

"Oh, Mark," she said, and suddenly slipped down on to the floor at his feet, and crossing her arms on his knees, laid her forehead against them. "Mark, *Mark*!"

She felt his hand on her hair, smoothing it gently.

"When I told you in Cap Ferrat that I loved you," he said, "the position was very different from the one we find ourselves in today. I thought our situation hopeless. Now it isn't. It may be awkward, for the present. Neither of us is modern enough or sufficiently unconventional to want to leap ahead too far and too fast. But the fact remains that I *am* now a free man and the time will come when I shall undoubtedly ask you, dear, *dearest* Etta, to marry me."

She felt as though she had been suddenly lifted up and transported to the starry skies. She felt that she could cry — laugh — do both simultaneously. She felt immeasurable love for him and quite unspeakable happiness. Like him, she, too, had once believed their love was hopeless and that she would never, *could* never belong to him.

There was silence between them — as though time itself stood still. The only sounds in the room were the crackling of the log fire and the sudden chime of the carriage clock which stood on the lacquered bureau.

Suddenly she was lifted up on to the sofa beside him and she was in his arms, held close, desperately close. His urgent lips were on her mouth. He kept saying,

"I love you, Etta, I love you with all my heart. Flair knew it. I know that she knew it She was always telling me that you and I were alike in so many ways and much more suited to each other than she and I could ever be. At the time, I thought she was talking nonsense. But she hit on the truth and if she can see what we feel, I think she'll be glad. Strangely enough, Flair was never jealous of you. She was *very* fond of you."

Etta felt the tears well into her eyes. She lay against

Mark's fast-beating heart, receiving his kisses and returning them, her slim fingers threading through the thick darkness of his hair, and he, with his, traced the fine contours of her face. She heard him whispering, "Don't send me back to London tonight, darling. Let me stay with you, my dear one, my love."

It was on the tip of her tongue to answer '*Yes*.' She wanted him to stay with her as much as he desired it. And this time it was not Rod who held her, wanted her. It was Mark, whom she loved absolutely and for whom she would have willingly died. But before she could say that word, '*Wait*' he himself spoke it.

"No, we must wait. It wouldn't be right — for you — or for me. This isn't the time or the place. I'll close the house down at once, darling. I'll hand it over to the agents. They can sell it. And you must go back to your flat — to your nice friend, Marian. Take another temporary job if you want to. I'll throw myself into mine This is October. In the New Year we can start a new life together. Does that appeal to you? Will you marry me, Etta, say in February next year?"

She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him.

"It sounds marvellous. Too good to be true. Oh, Mark, are you sure you want to marry me? You're such a wonderful person. You have so much. Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay free for a year or two . . . and look around?"

Now he drew back. Those dark handsome eyes that never failed to warm her heart, looked almost angry. Then he laughed.

"Look around for another girl? Is that what you're suggesting?"

"Oh, Mark," she said helplessly, felt his kisses warm and passionate against her lips and was answered.

Now it seemed that the whole atmosphere changed It was no longer strained. There were no more ghosts in the Chinese room. They sat by the fire, like friends, busy with

papers and files, making their lists, holding a business conference. After that they listened to the television news. Then Mark decided that he must drive back to town.

"Marie-Claire will be back in a moment. You won't be too long alone, will you?" he asked as he buttoned on his coat.

"No," she said, "I shall be all right."

He held her head between his hands for a moment.

"Will you remember how much I love you — no matter how much time we have to spend apart from each other during the months ahead?"

"I'll remember," said Etta. "Every moment I breathe, I'll remember it."

After he had gone, she went round the house making sure it was locked and bolted, waiting for the Swiss woman to come back. Marie-Claire wasn't very exciting, but she had been good about staying with Etta while she lived here alone, and Etta had been glad of her company.

She sat by the dying fire writing a long delayed letter to her father. She told him now that her future was settled, and he need feel no concern for her. In a few months' time she was going to marry Mark Trender.

She knew that her father would be delighted. The only time he had met Mark, the doctor had told her he had been most impressed.

And once Etta had finished her letter she sat doing nothing — just dreaming — wondering if she was living in a world of illusion — if such a wonderful thing could really be true.

Her thoughts turned to her favourite Heine poem that had once appealed to her because of its bitter unhappiness. She remembered those lines:

Twice have I loved unhappily,
Twice has love passed me by.

She shut her eyes, and in her imagination she was held fast in Mark's arms. She said aloud,

"Only *once* have I loved unhappily! This time it's going to be gloriously happy. Miraculous! Oh, Mark, my dearest *Mark!*"

In that instant it was as though she actually felt Flair's presence. Flair was here beside her, and the familiar, teasing voice was saying quite seriously, "*You don't need to feel awkward about me, Henry. It's quite okay. You're the sort of girl Mark needs. It'll be a terrific success. Give him my love. Good luck, Henry, and goodbye. Good old Henry!*"

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